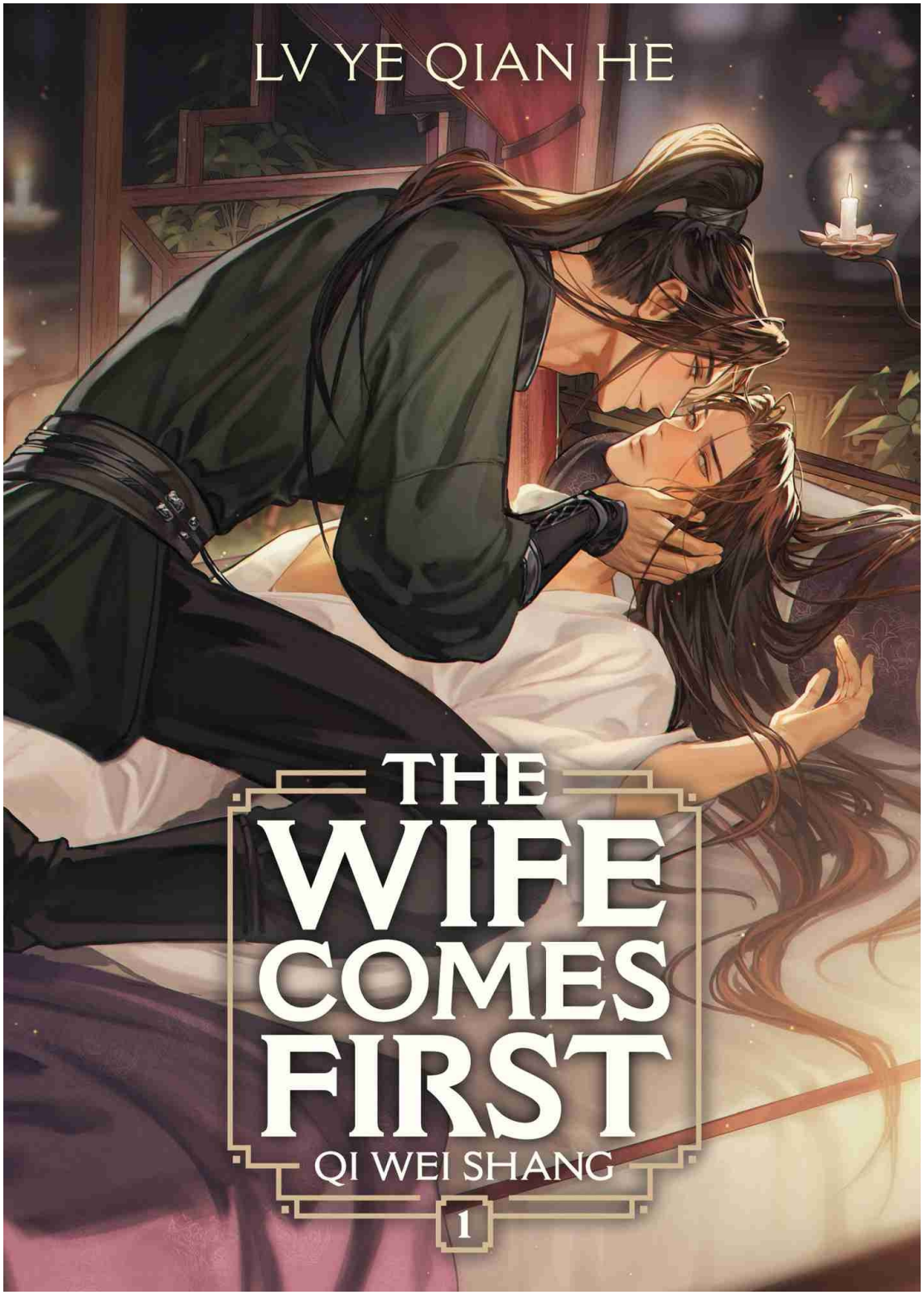
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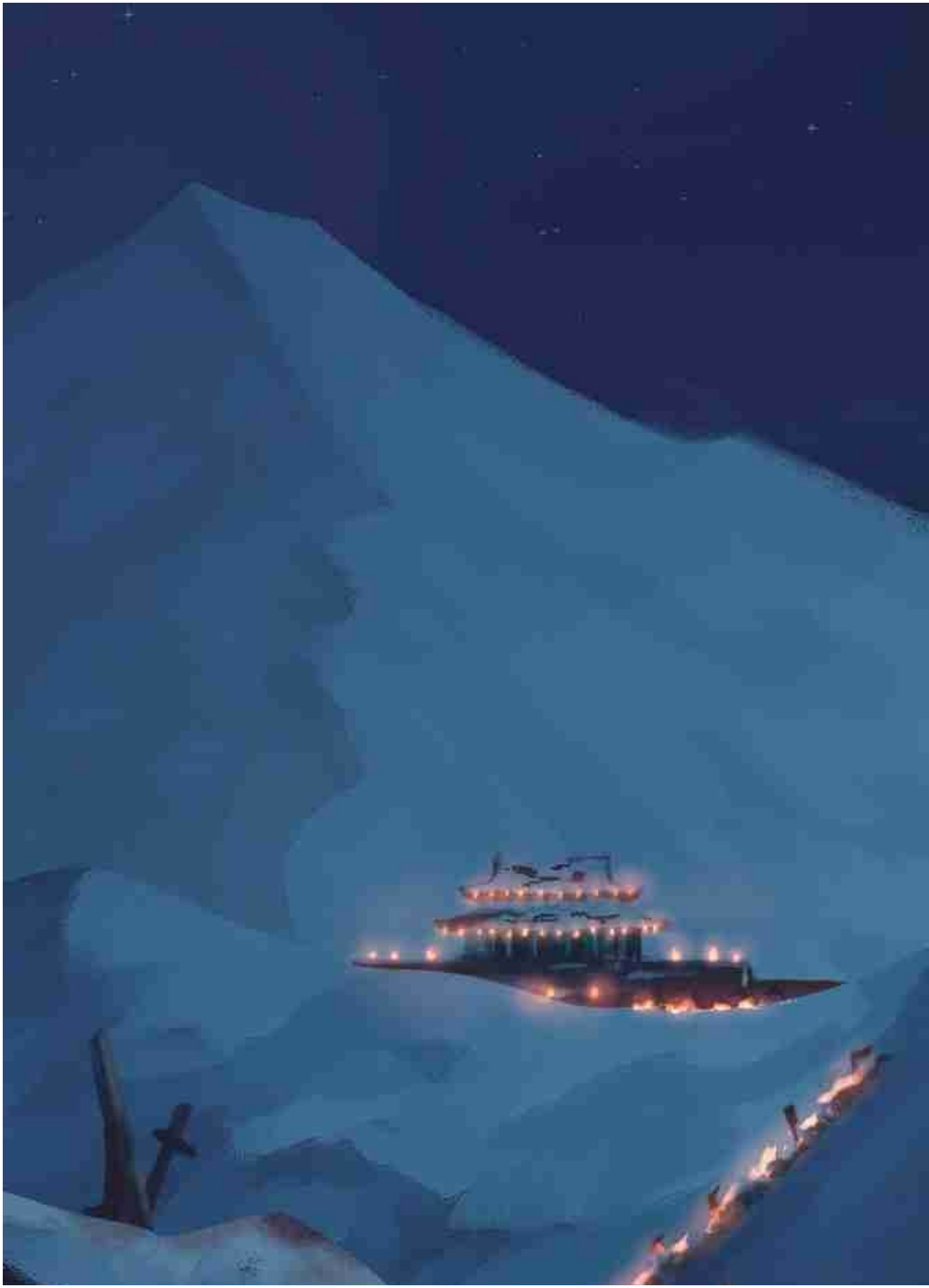

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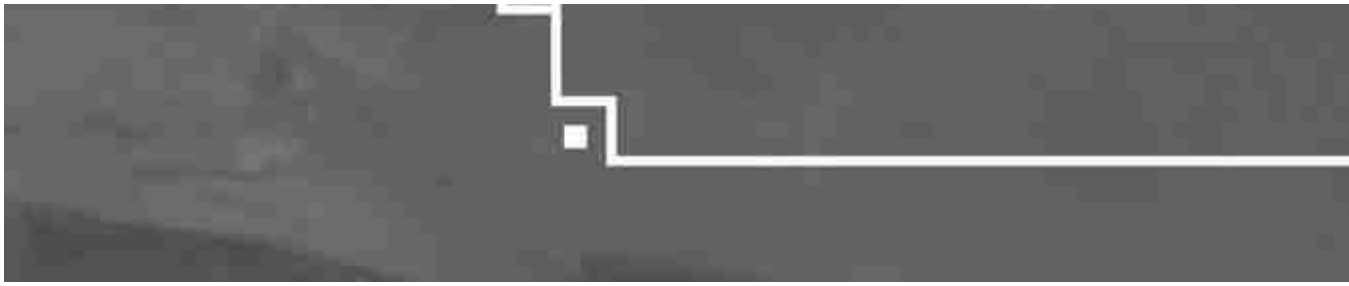

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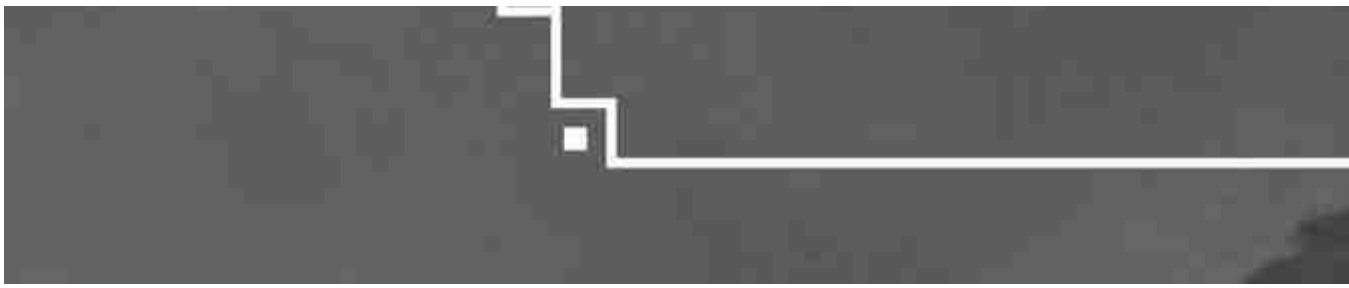

Chapter 1:
Despair and Rebirth

IT WAS A COLD WINTER in the 24th year of Hongzheng, the coldest in recent memory, and it had already snowed quite a bit. The snow had only just begun to slow down today.

A black horse galloped along a narrow path ten miles outside of the capital, with two people astride. Its hooves kicked up plumes of snow that slowly fell back to earth in a flurry as the two faded into the distance.

"Your Highness, the horse won't make it very far carrying us both… Please let this one down…" The voice of the man riding pillion sounded weakened, but his tone was as warm and gentle as always.

"Absolutely not—if I leave you in the snow with injuries this severe, you'll die within the hour!" Jing Shao wiped the frost off his face and tightened his legs about the horse's flanks, spurring it to continue galloping. He'd felt something was amiss with those men as soon as he'd exited his cell. If they'd really intended to take him to the land of Shu, they ought to have at least given the heavily wounded princely consort some medical attention, but instead they'd rushed the two of them out without so much as another word. If he hadn't killed one of the officers and purloined his horse, they probably would have been beheaded as soon as they left the city proper.

"This body of mine is barely hanging on, and I'll be dead soon enough. Let me down already!" The man behind him grew increasingly frantic. This horse beneath them wasn't some fine steed, and it was already starting to heave after being pushed so hard for so long with two people on its back. If this continued, neither man had a chance at survival.

"No! If we die, we die together!" Jing Shao shouted against the bitter wind. This man—his officially sanctioned princely consort, married to him with full rites—had been neglected by him for over a decade as he lavished attention on the concubines at the other's expense. Yet, in the end, the only one to go to prison with him, the only one willing to take a knife in the gut for him, was this wife he'd resented for over ten years!

Jing Shao was the second son of the late empress. His military feats were undeniable; he had been vanquishing foes on the battlefield since the age of fourteen, and been conferred the title imperial prince before he even reached the age of majority. The unwritten rule of the Chen Empire, where men were allowed to take men as wives, dictated that the son of a concubine should marry a man to keep peace in a clan.

Despite Jing Shao being a legitimate-born son, the empress consort had used the pretext that he had a same-blood older brother to justify forcing him to marry a man, effectively stripping him of his rightful claim to the throne. As a result, he'd become resentful and defiant, never showing his primary wife any respect and never helping his older brother fight for the throne in good faith…

The man behind him sneered. "And what virtue or ability could I possibly possess, to be worthy of Your Highness dying with me?"

“I’m the one who’s let you down. If we can live through this, I promise I’ll do whatever you wish,” Jing Shao said, consoling the man behind him. With one hand on the reins, he reached between them to tighten the knot tying them together. Another mile and they’d be at Wangyue Hill, where a footpath he often took while hunting would take them through Mount Fengyue. Once they were in the mountains, they could hide.

When Mu Hanzhang had spoken into the wind earlier, cold air had rushed into his lungs. Sprawled over Jing Shao’s back, he began to cough violently. A trickle of red blood dripped from the pale corner of his lips. Back in the prison cell, he’d taken a blow for Jing Shao, and he was wounded to the core; every bump on the road brought him another sharp jolt of pain. Due to the severe cold, he’d lost all sensation of his wound, but considering that he was already spitting up blood… He could only smile bitterly and simply let Jing Shao’s back take his weight.

After so many years of neglect—with even the serving concubine daring to flaunt her status in front of him—it would have been impossible for him not to hold any sort of grudge against Jing Shao. *Since he wants to keep me company in death, then I will just have to let him,* thought Mu Hanzhang, leaving it in the hands of fate.

Born a common son of a noble house, and having devoted himself to scholarly pursuits for ten years, he’d told his father he didn’t want to inherit the peerage. He only wanted to participate in the palace exams, in order to gain some scholarly acclaim and free himself from that family as soon as possible. But his father and principal mother[1] had made him marry Imperial Prince Cheng a year before the exams! He was a man, but his wings had been torn from him, leaving him captive in the confined cage of the inner harem, unable to ever again pursue his grand ambitions. After so many years, he no longer knew whether he should resent his cruel principal mother or his own irresponsible husband.

“They’re just ahead!” A cacophony of thundering hoofbeats, clattering iron armor, and the clanging of metal weapons was quickly approaching, along with a series of shouts, each sound ringing in their ears like a death knell.

Jing Shao lashed the horse with a whip, driving it into a desperate bolt toward Wangyue Hill.

Whoosh! An iron-tipped arrow sliced through the air. Jing Shao leaned out of its way, the man behind him tilting with him as a result.

“Hold on tight!” Jing Shao shouted.

Wrapping his arms around Jing Shao’s waist, Mu Hanzhang pressed himself closely against Jing Shao’s back to match his movements.

Beyond Wangyue Hill was a footpath through the woods where arrows could be easily evaded. Navigating the forest on horseback, Jing Shao weaved through the trees, and their pursuers gradually fell behind.

With a harsh yank on the reins, Jiang Shao steered the horse to jump over a boulder. As they alighted back onto the ground, he turned and asked, “Does your wound hurt?”

“It doesn’t…hurt…” The voice that answered him was only getting weaker.

“Hanzhang, don’t fall asleep!” Jing Shao called to him urgently, frowning. “Once we get through Mount Fengyue, we’ll be in Min County, where my former troops are. They will surely help us evade these assassins!” His words were both to

bolster himself and console Mu Hanzhang. After all this time in prison, with only thin clothing to fight against the cold, Mu Hanzhang was holding on purely by strength of will.

A neigh shot out from the horse under him, the creature suddenly snapping into a frenzy. Jing Shao kicked fiercely at the horse's abdomen, grabbed Mu Hanzhang, and leapt off, rolling to ease the fall. On the ground, he discovered that someone had left animal traps, and that one of the horse's hooves had been caught.

Mu Hanzhang forced himself to stay lucid as he said, "Just leave me here."

"We're already halfway through Mount Fengyue, so the rest of the way is downhill. I'll carry you!" Jing Shao scanned left to right, checking his options. There was a cliff face to one side, while the other was a steep slope overgrown with grass and bramble. This was the only mountain path; if their pursuers caught up to them, they were in trouble. Without hesitation, Jing Shao lifted Mu Hanzhang onto his back and dashed toward the woodland on the slope.

"I see them! Get them!"

"A thousand taels of silver for the one who takes Prince Cheng's head!"

Whoosh! Whoosh! A flurry of arrows flew out from between the trees, making Jing Shao's escape increasingly hectic.

He grunted as an arrow hit him in the right leg, and he stumbled. Mu Hanzhang fell from his hold.

"Your Highness!" Scrambling to his side, Mu Hanzhang lent him support to keep him upright.

Jing Shao shot him a glance, and to his surprise, found some color in his handsome, pale face. He looked to be in much better spirits than before. That said, the prince had seen a lot of death; he knew this was nothing more than the bright flare of life before it flickered out. The thought made his heart spasm with pain. Without a second thought, he yanked the arrow from his leg, took hold of the man by his side, and ran.

"Let's see where you'll flee to now!" The officer who followed the closest carried an enormous saber. He let out a vicious laugh.

In their panicked rush to escape, Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang found themselves at a dead end. Before them was the drop of a sheer cliffside. Behind them, the soldiers in hot pursuit. Escape seemed impossible.

Jing Shao settled Mu Hanzhang by the edge of the cliff, then spun, swinging out his leg. It took the officer off guard, slamming him into the ground. Without giving him room to breathe, Jing Shao followed through with another kick, aimed squarely at the chest, and hit him so hard that the soldier's mouth foamed. Jing Shao snatched the saber out of the officer's hand and darted forward to slash at the legs of another soldier's horse. It collapsed to its side, blocking the narrow mountain path. The two other horses that were following in pursuit were unable to stop in time and rammed into the blockade, their riders flinging off their mounts and toppling off the deep cliffside.

With the remaining soldiers' path impeded by the dead horse and Prince Cheng armed with a large saber, a look on his face like he was out for blood, they dared not approach. One by one, they took up their bows and began to shoot.

Jing Shao grunted, taking a hit. Blocking with the saber had been to no avail. He tore the arrow from his shoulder and tossed it back at the soldiers, eliciting a series of screams. Leaping over the dead horse, he hacked at the soldiers until he killed the remaining few who had shot at him.

Unable to avoid their volleys in his attack, he ended up riddled with arrows. From where he stood, he could see a second wave of soldiers in the distance who would soon be upon them. His gaze dropped to the steel saber in his hand. He could kill ten of them, but he couldn't kill a hundred, nor a thousand.

He took the blood-drenched saber back to the edge of the cliff. The blood on its blade and Jing Shao's own blood mingled, leaving a trail of crimson. He scooped up Mu Hanzhang, who had been leaning against a rock, into his arms. The man's breath was barely audible, an ashen pallor coloring his elegant face.

"Junqing, have you ever resented me?" Jing Shao asked, as he brushed away the blood staining the corner of Mu Hanzhang's lips.

For the first time in his life, he studied the face of his lawfully wedded wife. It was only now that he realized that Mu Hanzhang's beauty rivaled any of his concubines. He didn't possess the sultry allure of a woman, but rather emanated a beauty that shone through elegance and the unyielding integrity of an erudite soul.

Those beautiful eyes now reflected Jing Shao's unkempt face. How ironic that it had taken their idle chats in a prison for him to realize Mu Hanzhang was a kindred spirit, rare to encounter even once in a lifetime. What had he been doing since they'd married? How wonderful of a life had he let slip by?

"How could I not? If not for you, I would have made it onto the Golden List many years ago and ascended to the imperial court." Junqing was his courtesy name, but it'd never before left the other man's lips. Mu Hanzhang smiled, reached out, and slowly wiped away the blood staining Jing Shao's face. "But you're not to blame. You're a capable man. It is my fault that you could not inherit the throne…" His words trailed off into a fit of coughing.

Jing Shao laughed. "A capable man? And what am I capable of? I've been a complete fool; my whole life I never spent a day satisfied. Now that I look back on it, my judgment was so wildly off the mark, it bordered on the absurd—" His words turned into broken laughter.

Jing Shao tightened his embrace around Mu Hanzhang, then raised his face toward the heavens and laughed long and loud. To think, he'd spent his whole life on the battlefield fighting for his country only to be thrown away when he was no longer of any use to it.

He had spoiled his concubines and forsaken his wife, yet the one who remained by his side and hadn't abandoned him in the end was the very wife he'd neglected all these years. He had envied his older brother and been unwilling to wholeheartedly help him ascend the throne, but when he was in dire straits, the only one who had traveled far and wide using every means available to help him had been the same older brother he'd scorned…

Alas, how lamentable and tragic, that in the end his life had been nothing but a farce!

"And my life too… Hasn't it also been…a farce as well…" Mu Hanzhang let out a quiet sigh. "If there is…a next life…" But he did not finish the sentence. He did not take another breath.

His beautiful eyes slowly closed, and his slender hand fell onto the dark stone beneath him, all signs of life now absent. A flurry of snow had started falling at some point, and snowflakes landed upon his long eyelashes, where Jing Shao's breath melted them, their resulting beads of water rolling off his cheeks.

Holding the man in his arms close to his chest, Jing Shao softly said, "If there is a next life, I promise to treat you well, and use my whole life to make it up to you…"

He looked up at the boundless land and majestic mountains in the distance, soon to fall into the hands of the empress consort and her ruthless son. Hearing the hoofbeats closing in behind him, he slowly stood. Prince Cheng never fought a losing battle; even if he was to die, it would not be at the hands of these lowly scoundrels.

Jing Shao leapt from the edge of the cliff, the mountain's wind whistling past his ears, as he clung tightly to the man who no longer breathed. "If I never let go, then when I get to the Bridge of Helplessness, I can take hold of your sleeve…"

***

JING SHAO OPENED HIS EYES in the dark.

There was no celestial realm swirling with mist, nor was he facing a grim-faced reaper with tusks for teeth. Instead, his vision was filled with red gauze curtains illuminated by the flickering remainder of half-burned candles.

Dazed and fatigued to his very core, Jing Shao also found a skull-splitting pain at his temple. He rubbed at his throbbing head and slowly sat up. As feeling returned to his body, he started at the realization that someone was lying beside him. The man's crimson robes had been torn to shreds, disheveled black hair spread over his exposed chest, and his skin, as lustrous and warm as jade, was covered in blooming bruises.

Reaching out, he brushed aside the hair covering the man's face to reveal elegant, handsome features… Junqing!

Chapter 2:
Dealing with the Aftermath

HARDLY BELIEVING HIS EYES, Jing Shao traced Mu Hanzhang's face. That the skin was slightly cool under his hand made his heart plummet, but resting his touch there longer warmed him with the heat of life. He scanned Mu Hanzhang's beautiful face carefully under the candlelight and found it had returned to its former state. Aside from a mark Mu Hanzhang himself had made by biting his lower lip, this was clearly the face of a young man who only recently had his coming-of-age ceremony at twenty, as yet unmarred by the ravages of time.

What is going on? Jing Shao stared in a daze for quite some time before pulling open the lapels of his underrobe. In the 18th year of Hongzheng, he had taken an arrow in the chest that nearly claimed his life, but now the skin there was flawless. All of his other old scars had also disappeared. Not only that, while his muscles were well-defined, they were less robust than what he remembered.

He felt for a hidden compartment in the bed and pressed it. A small cabinet door opened, revealing a ledger with a blue cover. Opening it quickly, he flipped to the very last entry: *Received 2,000 taels of silver from Li Yanqing, exchanged 5,000 taels of silver in promissory note for salt permits, 13th year of Hongzheng, 19th of the Second Month…*

Without a word, he returned the ledger to its home and looked around, somewhat disoriented. It was obvious he had returned to his wedding night in the spring of the 13th year of Hongzheng.

That year, he'd expelled the Xiongnu and returned victorious, and out of all the princes, he had been the first to be conferred his title of imperial prince. None had dared challenge his might.

That year, the empress consort had convinced Father to marry Marquis Beiwei's common-born son to him, and the wedding had been tonight.

That year, he'd been only nineteen; the three feudatories had not yet been pacified, and his downfall had yet to begin…

He broke out in a laugh. "Heaven hasn't abandoned me! I'll be damned, luck's on my side, after all!" Once he'd determined that all this wasn't a dream, after the initial shock came the ecstasy of rebirth. It was impossible for him not to laugh.

A sudden moan emanated from the man lying next to him, interrupting Jing Shao's self-congratulatory thoughts, and his exaltations came to an abrupt halt. He hurriedly turned to look, only to find that the slumbering Mu Hanzhang had been woken by all the noise Jing Shao was making. His long eyelashes fluttered and slowly opened to reveal a pair of beautiful eyes.

Had Jing Shao thought his downfall had yet to begin? What a stupid assessment. Heaven was cruel, after all. It could have let him be reborn four hours earlier, and if it had, Junqing wouldn't be hurt like this.

Jing Shao cursed inwardly as he reached for Mu Hanzhang to pull him into his arms, yet as soon as his fingers grazed his skin, Mu Hanzhang recoiled away from him.

“Mm…” This sudden movement had tugged at the pain in Mu Hanzhang’s lower body, and it hurt so much that the blood drained from his face.

“Don’t move!” Jing Shao held him down, but when he felt a slight tremor running through the body beneath his hands, he couldn’t help but frown.

On their wedding night, his heart had been filled with resentment, and so he’d drunk too much. After all these years, he could no longer remember what on earth he’d done, only that the next day Mu Hanzhang had fainted as soon as they’d left the grand hall after meeting the emperor and empress. From what he was able to glean from this, he had most likely forced himself on Mu Hanzhang, and the man had been hurt rather badly.

Mu Hanzhang stopped struggling and merely stared at Jing Shao, his lovely eyes filled with humiliation and fear.

“Are you…” Jing Shao opened his mouth to continue talking, but he had no idea what he ought to say, so instead he turned around and pulled on the silk sash hanging in front of the bed. Before long, a handmaiden answered him from the outer chamber.

“Get hot water ready. This Prince wishes to bathe,” he loudly instructed.

Once the handmaiden acknowledged his command and left, Jing Shao turned back around. But he still didn’t know what to say, scratching his head awkwardly.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” he eventually said. After a moment’s thought, he decided to try and offer him words of comfort. “Um…I drank too much last night. I really didn’t intend to…”

“Your Highness, the hot water is ready. Shall we enter and assist you with the bath?” The voice of an older handmaiden rang out.

Jing Shao remembered that this was his senior handmaiden, Zhixi. Of course, as it was his wedding night, hot water would have already been prepared; the only reason she’d asked this question was to avoid having the servants see anything inappropriate.

“No need for that. You may all withdraw,” Jing Shao said, impatience tightening his tone.

Mu Hanzhang breathed out a sigh of relief. Having to lie passive and helpless to submit beneath a man was already a great humiliation, but if the servants were to see him in such a sorry state…

Mu Hanzhang groaned softly as that same man pulled away the covers and picked him up, surprising him. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t move.” Once the quilts were pulled aside, the bitter fruits of his actions were laid bare. Putting aside the countless bruises that mottled Mu Hanzhang’s skin, red and white bodily fluids coated the area between his thighs, and his rear was in such distress that Jing Shao could scarcely look. The furrow between his brows grew deeper and deeper. “I’ll take you to wash up.”

Take me to wash up? Mu Hanzhang looked at the man before him, somewhat puzzled. When this man said he wanted to take a bath, was it to save him from embarrassment? But why would he do such a thing? He’d showed no sign of mercy while tormenting him earlier.

“I’ll go myself,” Mu Hanzhang said, his voice ice. Immediately feeling he was being inappropriate, he added, pitching his tone lower, “How could I impose upon Your Highness so.”

Watching him sulk in a such a restrained way brought a smile to Jing Shao’s lips, yet sensing that such a reaction would make his remorse seem insincere, he flattened his expression before quietly coaxing his consort. “And where will you get the strength to do that? Ultimately, this is my fault, so just consider it my apology to you.”

Though they were husband and wife, it was improper under any circumstance for a prince to wait upon his consort. To Jing Shao, however, this was normal, as they were both men, and he’d treated the injuries of wounded soldiers in the military. He was confident in his abilities.

Unable to argue against him, Mu Hanzhang could only let him do as he wished.

Sensing that the man in his arms had stopped putting up resistance, Jing Shao, satisfied, happily carried him behind the screen. Unconcerned by the fact that he was still wearing an underrobe, he stepped right into the tub.

Once in the water, Mu Hanzhang broke free from his arms and leaned against the other end of the wooden tub. Jing Shao didn’t mind; he took off his soaked underrobe and scooped up a handful of hot water to wash his face, rinsing away the discomfort of his hangover.

As was appropriate for a bathtub in a prince’s estate, it was huge, and even with two men sitting inside of it, it didn’t feel cramped. Mu Hanzhang took a towel and carefully washed off the traces of the night from his body as he surreptitiously observed the other man, who was continuously rubbing at his temples. Apparently, he really had drunk too much last night.

Jing Shao shook his head hard in an attempt to clear it. He could still hear the whistling of the cold wind at the edge of the cliff, and soaking in this hot water didn’t feel real. But now wasn’t the time to reflect on the nature of life—he reached out and pulled the man curled up in the corner into his arms. Mu Hanzhang’s body immediately tensed.

“I can wash myself…” Startled, Mu Hanzhang frantically grabbed at Jing Shao’s hand moving toward his lower body.

“You’re in no condition to do it yourself,” said Jing Shao bluntly. “We’re both men. What are you so shy about?”

Mu Hanzhang was rendered speechless by his righteous and confident tone, and just as he came up with something to refute him with, Jing Shao’s finger suddenly probed into his body, stealing his words, and he instead released a muffled grunt.

“Does it hurt?” The other man was biting his bottom lip again, and so Jing Shao wrapped Mu Hanzhang into his arms, allowing him to sprawl against his chest. “Don’t bite yourself. It’ll be all right soon, and if it hurts, you can bite me.”

Pushing away his urge to tease, he quickly and gently scooped around inside Mu Hanzhang’s body. Mu Hanzhang didn’t bite him and simply gasped quietly for a while. Once everything inside had been cleaned out, Jing Shao grabbed a large towel and wrapped it around the man in his arms, then quickly stuffed him under their bed covers and turned away to search for a healing ointment.

The sheets had already been changed. Mu Hanzhang sat up and wrapped an underrobe around himself. He saw that the other man was dressed only in a thin robe, barefoot with his hair still dripping water as he stood in front of a set of drawers searching for something. Jing Shao's hands had been gentle earlier while cleaning him, and judging by the look in his eyes, it didn't seem like it'd been an act. It all made Mu Hanzhang a bit confused. But as long as the prince wasn't too harsh with him, the life ahead of him would be much easier.

"Come on, I'll apply the balm for you."

A suddenly magnified handsome face brought Mu Hanzhang's contemplations to a halt. He couldn't deny that Prince Cheng certainly was captivating. The imperial family was full of beautiful people to begin with, and this man was a top contender even among them… *Hang on, what balm?!*

"Uh, that… I can do that on my own." He snatched the small bottle out of Jing Shao's hands, his face suddenly suffused in heat. It was one thing when they were in the water earlier and Jing Shao couldn't really see, but now the room was lit up bright as day. Wouldn't that mean he would get to see everything?!

"We're already husband and wife, so what are you worrying about?" An involuntary smile quirked at Jing Shao's lips at the tinge of color on Mu Hanzhang's pallid cheeks. He climbed onto the bed, and taking advantage of his agility, stole the bottle back.

Mu Hanzhang was no match for him, so he could only wrap the quilt over his head; out of sight, out of mind.

Jing Shao happily spread those slender legs open, scooped out a small amount of ointment, and began to apply it. "This was granted by Father before I embarked on my last campaign. It's fantastic at stopping bleeding and acts as an analgesic."

The cooling balm didn't hurt to use and calmed the hot stinging sensation at the site of the injury. Mu Hanzhang, of course, knew the value of such a high-quality soothing balm. "How could you use such a precious medicine on a place like this?"

He poked his head out of the quilt just in time to see the look in Jing Shao's eyes, brimming with tender sympathy for him. This managed to somewhat comfort his heart, which was trapped in the deepest despair. Mu Hanzhang mocked himself inwardly. *How pitiful I am to feel happy over someone feeling sorry for me.*

"It's precisely because you're hurt in a place like this that it requires good medicine."

Finished, Jing Shao stared at the smooth curves of Mu Hanzhang's backside, imagining how nice they would feel under his hands…

Tearing his eyes away from that enchanting area, Jing Shao pretended he hadn't seen anything at all and threw the covers back over Mu Hanzhang. He then slipped under the quilts as well, sat up against the headboard, and picked up the lukewarm hangover broth from the small table before gulping down the entire bowl. It wasn't a wonderful start to the day to begin with, so he mustn't make it any worse.

"What is Your Highness doing sleeping on the outside of the bed? Sleep on the inside."

It was customary for a wife to sleep on the outside of the bed to more easily serve tea and to help their husband dress. Now that Jing Shao had made all this fuss, most of Mu Hanzhang's fear had already faded. He edged closer to Jing Shao, hinting

that he should move over to the inside. But though he butted right up against Jing Shao, the man seemed to have no intention to move over.

"It's fine, it's not like you're a woman, so why bother with any of that?" Jing Shao looked down and smiled. Candlelight gilded his features, making him seem even more attractive. Since he was already good-looking to begin with, when he smiled so gently, he was truly captivating. Mu Hanzhang couldn't help becoming momentarily dazed.

Jing Shao took another small bottle and poured a bit of transparent ointment onto his fingertip. "I got this marvelous ointment from Xiyu. If it's just a little tear, it can make it scab over immediately, and it'll be mostly healed by the next day. But it does hurt a bit, so bear with it." As he said this, he applied it to Mu Hanzhang's lower lip with one finger.

A sharp pain like a needle prick made Mu Hanzhang frown. He wanted to put some pressure on it, but Jing Shao grabbed his hand right away. "Don't touch. It'll only hurt for a moment."

Mu Hanzhang's fingers were slender and supple, and they felt wonderful to hold. These were hands that had spent years in the pursuit of calligraphy and painting, and they were quite unlike his own that were calloused from sword-wielding.

When Mu Hanzhang realized that he wasn't going to let go, he cleared his throat to remind him to do so.

"Oh! Let's go back to sleep." Jing Shao quickly released him and called a handmaiden to put out the candles before he burrowed beneath the covers. "We can't greet Father until after morning court, so we can sleep for another four hours."

"Mm-hmm," the man in the bed replied and did not speak again. But out of Jing Shao's view, Mu Hanzhang's ears quietly turned red.

Chapter 3:
Match Made in Heaven

As the breathing of the man beside him became long and even, Jing Shao inched close and left a gentle kiss on his forehead. He thought about pulling Mu Hanzhang into his arms, but fearing that it might jolt him awake, could only give up on that idea. He lay on the bed and pondered how he had been suddenly brought back to the year he was nineteen—the last thing he remembered was holding Junqing to him and jumping off a cliff, and then everything went dark… As he couldn't figure out anything no matter how hard he tried, he turned his thoughts to what had happened in the 13th year of Hongzheng.

In the winter of the year prior, he'd expelled the Xiongnu and returned victorious. The emperor had been greatly pleased and broke precedent to confer the title of Prince Cheng upon him even though his two elder brothers had not yet been granted titles. For a time, the court had been abuzz with speculation that His Majesty had plans to appoint him, the third prince, as the crown prince. But then, right after the Spring Festival, that stepmother of his told him that no prince in history had ever been titled before taking a wife, and so she had hastened to arrange him a match. And that match was the second young master from the House of Beiwei.

The empress consort was making him marry a man in order to destroy his prospects; Jing Shao and the second prince, Jing Chen, were both sons of the late empress and were legitimate sons from a primary wife. Naturally he had refused, flipped the table, and left in a flutter of sleeves, but just as he'd been about to inform Father that the empress consort harbored a hidden agenda, at the very next morning's court, his father had officially declared that his wedding was to take place on the 8th of the Third Month, leaving him no chance to resist.

Ever since then, Prince Cheng had gone from being the sought-after prospective heir to an abandoned child, a discarded piece in a political game.

He smiled self-deprecatingly in the dark. Now that this "discarded piece" had suddenly returned to the board as a secret weapon, it was hard to say who would emerge as the victor this time around.

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The next day, even though it was possible to wait until after morning court before greeting the imperial couple, there was a series of rituals he had to observe. That meant they couldn't get much sleep.

Zhixi knocked on the door to the inner chamber. "Your Highnesses, it's time to get up."

Mu Hanzhang had startled awake immediately, being a light sleeper. "Wait outside," he instructed the handmaiden, and he stirred Jing Shao gently. "Your Highness, wake up."

“Hmm?” Jing Shao opened his eyes in a daze and saw that familiar face, the same handsome one he saw every day waking up in prison. “What is it?”

“It’s time to get up. This one…must get off the bed to get a pair of undergarments.” Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together. Last night, this man had forcefully applied balm on him, then insisted on sleeping on the outside of the bed, so he still hadn’t managed to reach his clothing.

It took a moment of reflection before Jing Shao realized that this place wasn’t prison but his wedding chamber.

“Oh, pardon me,” he said, finally catching on to what his new wife was asking from him. Jing Shao sat up immediately and reached for the clean undergarments from the clothing rack, eagerly handing them over in a bid to please.

Mu Hanzhang took the offered pants, then noticed that Jing Shao was still staring straight at him, leaving him no choice but to dress under the covers.

Not only did he fail to garner the desired approval, he’d even been taken for a lecher. Jing Shao, who never learned what a “come on, praise me” expression looked like due to his years on a battlefield, could only awkwardly rub his nose.

“Congratulations, Your Highnesses. This one is Duofu. Greetings, Your Highness Princely Consort Cheng.” The first to enter the room was a round-faced, chubby eunuch named Duofu, who was also the chief steward of the Prince Cheng Estate. He knelt with a smile and bowed to Mu Hanzhang.

Mu Hanzhang accepted the courtesy and rewarded him a coin purse he had prepared in advance with money inside. “Eunuch Duofu, please rise.” Since Duofu was an old eunuch who had served Jing Shao since he was a child, Mu Hanzhang could hardly afford to pull rank.

Duofu accepted it with a smile, and then it was the senior handmaiden Zhixi’s turn, as well as the two others who waited on Jing Shao, Mengxi and Miaoxi. But this time, Mu Hanzhang did not hold back, and he accepted the full kowtow, rewarding each of them with small gold pendants.

Jing Shao looked on with silent approval. He thought to himself that as Junqing was raised in a noble house, though common-born, his methods of dealing with servants were perfectly considered, and thus he did not plan on saying anything.

Mu Hanzhang’s own two handmaidens who came as his dowry also came to greet Jing Shao. Lanxuan was no good with words, and all she managed was a flat “Greetings, Your Highness,” and nothing more after that; Lanting was timid and stammered through her congratulations with her head down, trembling a little through it all.

Watching the way these two handmaidens acted, Mengxi surreptitiously pursed her lips at them while looking at Miaoxi. She thought to herself, *That’s a commoner for you; even his handmaidens are such bumpkins.* But then when she turned to Zhixi, Zhixi glared at her. Only then did she hang her head, abating her rudeness.

All Mu Hanzhang did was glance vaguely in his two handmaidens’ direction, not giving away anything with his calm eyes. Before his wedding, Marquise Beiwei had said that the handmaidens serving him were too old and could draw suspicion to him if they were kept by his side, only allowing him to bring these two younger ones.

Jing Shao’s brows knitted slightly; these two handmaidens did not look at all like they’d been with Mu Hanzhang for a long time. It seemed he’d need to find him

some better servants. “Duofu, once we’re done here, get a pageboy and a couple of bodyguards for him.”

“That was my oversight. I will get that done today,” Duofu immediately apologized. Since the princely consort was a man, he was allowed the company of a pageboy and bodyguards. However, it was common for most husbands to overlook this fact. His Highness leaving these instructions showed he truly cared for the princely consort.

When Mu Hanzhang heard these words, his placid expression relaxed just a smidgen, and he rose to bow. “Thank you, Your Highness.” Granting him such servants was blanket permission for him to leave the house freely. To him, such kindness was akin to a gift of coal in midwinter.

Noting the look of delighted surprise in his eyes, Jing Shao felt a pang in his heart. He reached out and stopped him from bowing. “These are things I ought to do anyway. What are you thanking me for?”

In a prince and consort’s formal meeting with the imperial couple on the day after their wedding, the two must be in full court attire. Jing Shao had already been granted a title, so naturally the ranking of his court attire had to be higher. Officials of the Chen Empire of third rank proper or higher wore purple; princes a dark yellow; the crown prince apricot; and an imperial prince moon blue. Mu Hanzhang was a princely consort of an imperial prince, their marriage registered with the imperial ancestral temple, so he was a consort of the first rank proper. But he was a man, so he could not wear a woman’s court attire. Thus, his court attire was also purple, although it was similar in style to that of a prince’s robes.

Mu Hanzhang was twenty this year and had already gone through his coming-of-age ceremony, so Lanting had retrieved the matching purple-gold headdress for his formal court attire. Although Jing Shao wasn’t twenty yet, he had already been granted a title, so he could wear the five-clawed silver dragon crown. The purple-gold headdress was unlike ordinary headdresses, and Lanting, who had never seen such a latch before, was unable to open it no matter what she tried. As she panicked, her forehead began to glisten with sweat. Yet she didn’t want to ask for help from Zhixi and the other handmaidens either, lest she appear inexperienced and make her young master look bad.

Jing Shao shot a glance at the young girl, approached, and gestured for the headdress. He opened the latch with practiced ease. “It’s the first day of our marriage, so as your husband, I should be the one to help you put on your headdress.”

In a previous dynasty, there had been a tradition where a husband would help his newly wedded bride apply her forehead decoration the morning after the wedding to soothe an anxious wife who had to greet the in-laws. But now the yellow flower decoration had gone out of style, so Jing Shao was conjuring this from thin air.

“Your Highness?” Mu Hanzhang, who had been sitting down before, could only stand up again. “How is that appropriate?”

Jing Shao didn’t answer him, and instead he solemnly closed the latch over his topknot, then smoothed out the golden ribbons into the rest of Mu Hanzhang’s silky hair.

Two extraordinarily beautiful people standing together, one effortlessly elegant, the other stern and handsome: No matter which way you looked at them, they seemed a perfect match. Miaoxi, who was helping Jing Shao with his jade-trimmed belt,

couldn't help but exclaim, "Your Highnesses standing together next to each other are like the mystical acolytes to the gods, a match made in heaven."

She had long since figured out the situation from this morning; not only did His Highness not hate the princely consort, he was actually very fond of him. Miaoxi, always quick on the uptake, naturally wouldn't let the chance to win the prince's favor escape her so easily.

"Is that so?" Hearing this, Jing Shao wrapped an arm around Mu Hanzhang's waist and guided him to the dressing mirror. The man beside him was slender and tall but was still shorter than him by half a head. This made Jing Shao rather proud of himself. "Mm-hmm, we are indeed a good match."

Mu Hanzhang stared at the image in the mirror in a daze. He saw that the cut on his lower lip was already mostly healed, and the scab had even fallen off, leaving behind a trace of pink that was barely noticeable without careful examination. It wasn't until he became aware of the handmaidens giggling that he realized Jing Shao's proximity, at which point he immediately removed the hand from his waist.

"Let's go. We're going to be late." And once he said this, he went outside without waiting for Jing Shao.

Sensing her own young master's rudeness, Lanting hastened to explain things to Jing Shao in a whisper. "Your Highness, please don't hold it against him. His Highness is just shy."

"Hmph. Did you think This Prince couldn't tell?" Jing Shao followed Mu Hanzhang without much of an expression on his face, but inwardly, he was overjoyed to see a touch of pink rising to the tip of Junqing's ears.

"Miss Zhixi, is His Highness angry?" Lanting asked. She flinched in the wake of Jing Shao's dismissive snort and immediately turned to Zhixi.

Zhixi covered her lips with a handkerchief. "That's just the way His Highness is. That's the authority of a man who spent years on the battlefield. You'll see soon enough."

Mu Hanzhang and Jing Shao were carried to the palace in an ornate palanquin with a decorative canopy and red curtains, manned by eight servants. Mu Hanzhang shifted in the seat uncomfortably, finding the soreness in his buttocks truly hard to bear.

"Does your lower back hurt? Lean on me; I'll massage it for you." Jing Shao, of course, had noticed, and he pulled Mu Hanzhang into his arms. Without waiting for his permission, he laid one of his big hands on Mu Hanzhang's back and started kneading. The man in his arms stiffened for a moment before slowly relaxing, and Jing Shao couldn't help but smile. "Whatever the empress says in a bit, all you have to do is listen. And whatever she tries to bestow on you, just take it without reservation."

He remembered that the empress had given Mu Hanzhang some rather valuable items in his previous life at this meeting, which gave him the misconception that Mu Hanzhang was in her good graces. It only served to make Jing Shao reject him all the more. In hindsight, he'd been incredibly childish. How was anyone supposed to turn down a gift from the empress? And besides, no matter who his partner was, as long as he was a man, he would have had the empress's approval.

Mu Hanzhang looked up at him and nodded. "This one has understood." He had heard rumors of the imperial family, and as the son of the late empress, the fact

that Jing Shao didn't get along with the empress consort wasn't unusual. However, was he saying this to comfort him? This thought tinged his heart with sweetness; aside from that terrible evening, this man's behavior after sobering up had really been rather gentle.

"When we're in private, let's not call yourself 'this one' anymore. It sounds so distant." As Jing Shao massaged him, he thought about how lovely Mu Hanzhang's narrow waist felt in his hands. Unlike a woman's waist that was so fragile he felt he could break it with a squeeze, it was like the midsection of a panther, taut and brimming with strength, gracefully curved.

Mu Hanzhang felt the massaging force kneading his lower back was exactly right. Even though he knew it was inappropriate, he couldn't push Jing Shao away either, so he had no choice but to talk to him while pretending such a thing wasn't happening. "One cannot neglect etiquette, and Your Highness must also be careful when we speak in private—it would be best to call her 'mother,' for if someone with a hidden agenda were to overhear you, it would be grounds enough for a formal complaint."

When he heard these words, Jing Shao's lips quirked unbidden, and he leaned in to ask, "Junqing, are you concerned for me?"

Mu Hanzhang shot him a glare. "This one was merely giving a remonstration." He'd only ever heard that Prince Cheng was hotheaded and quick to anger; he'd never imagined that he would be so flippant.

Jing Shao found his reaction so adorable that he couldn't help himself and laughed aloud.

The young eunuch walking alongside the palanquin had to pinch himself when he heard laughter. *Good heavens, everyone in the capital knows Prince Cheng married a man for a consort and now can no longer inherit the throne, and to think he can still laugh like that—it can't be that the empress has driven him insane, can it?*

With the prince laughing at him on top of everything else, Mu Hanzhang turned away in a bid to ignore him, only to end up smooshing his face into Jing Shao's solid and warm chest. A blush spread over his face, unbidden, as he realized that it looked like he was throwing himself at Jing Shao. He immediately struggled to sit up.

"All right, all right, I'll stop laughing." Jing Shao quickly grabbed him to stop him from rising, and whispered, "Don't move around. Otherwise, the palanquin-bearers will notice."

"Why you…" Sure enough, that made Mu Hanzhang restrict his movements, leaving only his angry glaring.

Chapter 4:
A Visit to the Palace

COMPARED TO THEIR PREVIOUS dull and lifeless appearance, those beautiful dark eyes were far livelier now, bright with emotion. Jing Shao was only trying to show him a cheerful face to let him know he didn't have to be so timid and overly hesitant. On second thought, though, it was precisely because he'd refused to listen to Junqing and had been so arrogant that he'd thought everyone beneath him, that by the time his world began to fall apart, he'd made so many enemies that they were only too happy to bury him. The smile faded from his face.

"Your Highness, we have arrived at the Meridian Gate," the young eunuch Chunxi said from outside the curtain as the palanquin came to a stop. Usually, the entourage could continue into the palace, but as they had to greet the imperial couple in the empress's palace today, they were required to leave the palanquin at the Meridian Gate and board the palace carriage.

As the carriage was surrounded on all sides by eunuchs, once the two stepped inside, they stopped exchanging words altogether.

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AFTER MORNING COURT, Emperor Hongzheng went to the empress's Rite of Luan[2] Palace, and sat with the empress, Lady Wu, in the main hall waiting for the newlyweds to come pay their respects. In his mid-forties, Emperor Hongzheng was in his prime, possessing the calmness and wisdom of a competent emperor. When he sat there, even without speaking, he had an imposing aura, commanding respect without showing anger.

When he saw his father younger than he remembered by more than ten years, Jing Shao's hand clenched into a fist before gradually relaxing, hidden in his moon-blue sleeves. He bowed and greeted the imperial couple respectfully alongside Mu Hanzhang.

Emperor Hongzheng first praised Jing Shao but then lectured him a little. "You're all grown up now, so from now on you must think before you act. Don't let us hear about how you flipped over your mother's tea table again."

"Your son understands. Thank you, Father, for your guidance." Though Jing Shao's response was bland, the expression on his face was entirely indignant.

"Today is a happy day, Your Majesty. Let's not criticize him further." Naturally, the empress took it all in and quickly stepped in to smooth things over with a smile. "Today is for meeting our son-in-law."

A handmaiden had already placed soft cushions before the imperial couple. Mu Hanzhang stepped forward, knelt, and kowtowed to Emperor Hongzheng. Then, he picked up the tea from the table and raised it above his bowed head. "Father, please have some tea." Every one of his motions during the rite was perfect, every gesture

brimming with the elegance befitting a cultured intellectual.

Emperor Hongzheng took the teacup from him and took a sip. He smiled and said, “We never imagined that Mu Jin’s second son would turn out to be a man of such charm and grace.”

“Thank you, Father.” Mu Hanzhang’s demeanor was neither arrogant nor submissive. Following etiquette, he knelt before the empress to serve her tea as well.

The empress took it with a smile. She seemed in no hurry to ask him to rise and instead turned to the emperor and started chatting with him. “Your Majesty is wise indeed, for this second son of the Mu clan became a Provincial Graduate at seventeen. Allegedly, all the young nobles in the capital call him ‘the Erudite Gentleman’ out of respect.”

“Is that so?” Emperor Hongzheng was now properly interested—passing the provincial examinations at seventeen made him an extraordinarily intelligent young man. He’d only ever met Marquis Beiwei’s heir and had never imagined that the Marquis’s common-born son would turn out to be such a well-hidden gem. He couldn’t help but feel a little regretful, for if such a man had been allowed to participate in the Civil Service Examination, he would surely have become quite the asset, as well as a fine tool for keeping Marquis Beiwei under his thumb. What a pity indeed.

Having knelt for so long, Mu Hanzhang’s body began feeling worse and worse, his face paling. But still, his back remained straight, and he interjected at the appropriate moment to remind his new in-laws of his compromised position. “It was nothing more than a casual jest on the part of some of this one’s childhood companions, not to be taken seriously.”

“Aiyoh, why does this child look so pale?” said the empress, casting a look toward Jing Shao. When she noticed that he didn’t seem to care or have any intention to rescue Mu Hanzhang from his situation, the sharpness in her eyes softened somewhat. With a smile, she handed Mu Hanzhang an open, ornate gift box. The jewels within glowed with such a brilliant splendor that it was obvious they were worth a fortune.

Given such a substantial welcome gift, Mu Hanzhang recalled what Jing Shao had told him inside the palanquin and accepted it without hesitation. As he stood up, his vision went black. He swayed for a moment before managing to regain himself. A palace maid nearby immediately stepped forward to assist him.

“If you’re feeling unwell, you two should head home.” With that, Emperor Hongzheng waved a hand, indicating that they could go.

While Mu Hanzhang turned down the palace maid’s offer of help, Jing Shao continued to completely ignore him. He simply bowed to the imperial couple and walked out of the hall on his own. Heaven only knew how much he wanted to wrap Junqing in his arms and not let him take another step by himself, but they were inside the palace, so he had no choice but to keep his demeanor icy and feign impatience.

Once they passed the palace gates, Mu Hanzhang alighted from the carriage and stared at the back of the man taking large strides away from him. He sneered at his own foolishness. What on earth was he hoping for? Was that fleeting tenderness nothing but a facade, just as he thought?

Attempting to catch up, he only managed two steps before he blacked out for a moment and fell forward. The pain he expected from hitting the floor never arrived,

his body instead crumpling into a warm embrace.

"Junqing, what's the matter?" When his eyes opened again, he was met only with Jing Shao's anxious face.

Jing Shao had nimbly wrapped the man into his arms upon his fainting and had brought them both into the palanquin. "Chunxi, go to the Imperial Academy of Medicine and ask Jiang Heng, Doctor Jiang, to come to the estate. Raise the palanquin—we're heading back immediately."

"Certainly!" The palanquin-bearers picked them up and set off at once, while Chunxi ran in the direction of the Academy of Medicine.

"Junqing…Junqing…where does it hurt, hmm?" Jing Shao held the man in his arms close to his chest and felt his forehead. "How did you come down with a fever?"

Mu Hanzhang didn't say a word. The way this man ran both hot and cold left him guessing, and the pitying look His Majesty had given him today had also left him with crushing heartache. Physically unwell and emotionally upset, he felt discouraged and disheartened, and his senses only grew more and more groggy.

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"JUDGING BY HOW SHAO-ER[3] looked, it seems he wasn't very satisfied with the marriage arrangement I made for him," the empress said with a troubled expression after the two left.

"He's still young, so of course he cannot comprehend your painstaking efforts. But this child, he is truly an open book." Emperor Hongzheng was honestly rather satisfied. He'd taken note of all Jing Shao's reactions, and all of his defiance and displeasure had been vividly expressed. If he had somehow managed to appear deeply grateful after losing his right to succession, then he would have been far too cunning.

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BACK AT THE PRINCE CHENG ESTATE, bearing Mu Hanzhang in his arms, Jing Shao ran inside. "Bring me a cold handkerchief."

Covering Mu Hanzhang with a quilt, Jing Shao took the requested item Zhixi handed him and used it as a cold compress on Mu Hanzhang's forehead.

"Junqing, do you feel really bad?" Jing Shao stared at him, his chest feeling tight.

In his previous life, Mu Hanzhang's health had grown worse by the year, and in their last few years together, he'd taken medication like other people took meals. This time, he'd have to take good care of him and make sure he stayed healthy.

"I'm fine. Don't we have to go to the second prince's estate as well? Let's not waste any more time." This said, he struggled to get up, but Jing Shao held him down with one hand.

“I already sent word to my brother. He won’t blame you.” He did still believe they should visit his brother. Etiquette was one aspect of it, but more importantly, he did not wish his brother to misunderstand his absence as an intentional slight. But none of these things were as important as Junqing’s health. He’d just have to explain it to his brother later.

“Your Highness, the imperial physician is here,” Zhixi said, entering the room.

Doctor Jiang wasn’t the highest-ranking imperial physician within the Academy of Medicine. While he was skilled at healing, he couldn’t fathom why Prince Cheng would ask for him by name to make a house call. They had never once crossed paths before.

After taking Mu Hanzhang’s pulse and checking the coloring in his cheeks, Doctor Jiang turned somewhat hesitantly toward Jing Shao. “Um…”

Understanding his meaning, Jing Shao told the servants to withdraw.

“Doctor, please speak your mind.”

“Judging by the princely consort’s pulse, I believe it’s likely caused by an injury and pent-up emotions.” Doctor Jiang glanced at Jing Shao again. This sort of fever wasn’t a serious illness at all, and Prince Cheng must have had other reason to send for him. He continued, “Forgive me for speaking my mind, but though His Highness is a man, in terms of conjugal matters, a man actually can be injured far easier than a woman. It would be best if you show a bit more compassionate restraint.”

Just a mere sentence had Mu Hanzhang blushing bright red, and Jing Shao also had to rub at his nose in embarrassment. “It is This Prince’s fault for being too rash.”

“Your Highness, please forgive me.” Doctor Jiang also felt a bit uneasy, concerned his explanation had earned Prince Cheng’s ire.

Jing Shao laughed, then said, “This forthrightness of yours is exactly what This Prince prefers, Doctor Jiang.” He took the prescription Doctor Jiang handed him, and after ordering Mengxi to prepare the decoction, Jing Shao produced a string of coral beads from his sleeve.

“Your Highness, this is highly inappropriate.” Doctor Jiang immediately broke into a cold sweat. He had always emphasized harmony in neutrality and didn’t wish to get involved with these princes and their succession fight.

“This isn’t for you,” Jing Shao said impatiently when he didn’t accept it. “I’ve heard your son is a master of martial arts, and he’s already passed the Imperial Military Exam this year. This is a congratulatory gift for him.” Red coral beads could ward off the misfortune of bloodshed and were indeed a gift for those practicing martial arts. Doctor Jiang could hardly refuse him again. Besides, the prince was letting him know he’d actually taken interest in his son, so he could rest assured this wasn’t what he’d assumed.

“In that case, I must thank Your Highness for the gift, and I’ll ask him to come thank you in person another time.” Doctor Jiang accepted the coral beads, bowed, and said his farewells.

Jing Shao asked Duofu to see the imperial physician out, while he himself sat back down at the edge of the bed, replacing the handkerchief on Mu Hanzhang’s forehead with a fresh one.

“Just let the handmaiden do these things. Your Highness should go get some rest,” Mu Hanzhang said indifferently.

This man’s momentary tenderness might just be out of novelty and amusement, not genuine kindness toward him. It was easy to see whether someone was sincere from the little things they did, and the way the prince had acted today in the palace had frozen his only recently thawed heart into shards of ice.

“Junqing?” Noticing that the ease Mu Hanzhang had shown in the morning had once more turned back to apathy, Jing Shao surmised that what had happened in the palace today must have upset him. He’d never been patient enough to explain things, while Junqing had the kind of temperament that made him keep his feelings to himself. He would have to say more from now on. Scratching his head awkwardly, he sighed. “I’m sorry you had to put up with what happened at the palace today.”

Mu Hanzhang opened his eyes and turned to him. This man was actually aware of it?

“I simply knelt for a bit longer than expected. It’s not like I’m a woman. I’m not going to be upset by my mother-in-law’s power play. You worry too much, Your Highness.” While he’d spoken in a gentle voice, pleasing to the ear, and there was no hint of resentment from his words alone, somehow, Jing Shao could just tell he was angry.

“Everyone in the capital is laughing at me. They say that I’ve accomplished great feats but can never inherit the throne. Though I may be a legitimate-born son, my status is not even as high as the first prince, the son of a palace maid…” Jing Shao said these words self-deprecatingly. These sentiments had been bottled up in his heart for more than a decade, and now that he’d said them aloud, they’d come straight from the bottom of his heart.

Mu Hanzhang’s hand hidden in the quilts gradually curled into a fist, and his heart only grew colder. Sure enough, Jing Shao hadn’t been drunk last night at all, and everything, all of it, had been done simply to torment him. He said, “This one knew about all of that. This one asks not for anything else from Your Highness, but only that when Your Highness accomplishes all of his goals, a Writ of Divorce be granted to this one.”

Chapter 5:
Fever

A *WRIT OF DIVORCE?* Jing Shao paused in surprise, then immediately gave a dismissive snort. “You’re a man, so divorcing you won’t affect your reputation, but a divorcé, just like a wife, can’t participate in the exams. Even if I let you go, in this lifetime, the Civil Service Examination will forever be out of your reach.”

“What do you want to do then?” Mu Hanzhang sat up and stared at him icily. If this man wanted to keep him around for further tormenting, he wasn’t going to sit there and bear it.

“I can’t inherit the throne, and you can’t take the exams either, so we’re even,” said Jing Shao self-assuredly with that mildly magnetic voice of his.

Mu Hanzhang was caught off guard. He stared blankly at Jing Shao for what seemed like an age; a crack seemed to have appeared in his stern expression.

“Huh?” he said, his jaw dropping in a rather adorably foolish way. He felt as if he’d been grabbed by the neck and yanked high into the air only to be tossed onto a fluffy cushion…

Seeing that vacant look on Mu Hanzhang’s face, Jing Shao found it rather amusing and was just about to gently poke one of his cheeks when Mengxi’s voice rang out in the outer chamber. “Your Highness, His Highness’s medicine is ready.”

Jing Shao’s brows furrowed for a moment, then he asked Mengxi to bring the medicine into the room. Mu Hanzhang’s expression flattened, and he remained silent with his head bowed. Stealing a glance at his face, Mengxi smiled and brought the medicine to the bed.

“Your Highness, could you let me attend to His Highness as he takes his medicine?” Mengxi cast a troubled look at Jing Shao, who was refusing to move from his perch at Mu Hanzhang’s bedside.

Jing Shao took the bowl from her and waved in dismissal. He turned his head to call out, “Duofu!”

Duofu dipped his head through the crack in the door to show his smiling face. “Here.”

“Guard the door.” Jing Shao couldn’t help but find his behavior amusing. Despite his age, Duofu still acted like a child.

“Certainly.” Duofu naturally knew exactly what the prince wanted him to do; he sent the handmaidens away to do chores and called for bodyguards to stand outside all four corners of the house, while he himself stood outside the door. Once he was sure no one could hear the conversation happening inside, he leaned back against a pillar to catch some sun with a smile.

“You just won’t let me finish.” Jing Shao held the bowl in one hand and stirred it with a spoon. “Other people said those things, but I know full well what I’m worth. Even if I were to marry the heavenly immortal empress, that throne would never be mine.”

“Why do you say that, Your Highness?” Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together. It sounded like Jing Shao intended to have an open, honest conversation with him, and his manner did not seem feigned. Perhaps it was really he who misread this entire situation?

Jing Shao handed him the bowl. “I joined the military at fourteen and spent all these years fighting on the battlefield. I’m an expert when it comes to war, but I don’t know the first thing about governing a country. Look at me—I couldn’t even get an imperial physician on my side. How can I possibly compete for the throne?”

Mu Hanzhang took the bowl from him. Had Jing Shao tried to bribe an imperial physician in front of him for the mere sake of showing him such an example?

“I may understand all that, but who would believe me if I were to tell anyone? Take today, for example. If I’d supported you at the palace, Father would surely think me too cunning, too good at putting on a good front, and things would only get harder for me.” As Jing Shao said this, he couldn’t help but sigh. Despite this, if he kept acting just as resentful and competitive, Father ultimately still wouldn’t be able to tolerate him.

Swallowing the black medicine in one gulp, its bitterness traveling from the root of his tongue to the depths of his heart, Mu Hanzhang realized that life wasn’t easy even for the descendants of the imperial family. The moment he put the bowl down, a piece of honeyed fruit was stuffed into his mouth. Mu Hanzhang looked up to that man’s smiling face as he wiped a drop of medicine clinging to the corner of his lips. Since Jing Shao was an extraordinarily handsome man to begin with, and he wasn’t prone to smiling, whenever he did, he was especially dazzling to look at.

The rumors claimed Prince Cheng was hotheaded, quick to anger, stern and reserved, yet ever since last night, this man had already smiled at him many times. Mu Hanzhang let out a light sigh. Perhaps he should try to give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, he had nothing left for Jing Shao to exploit.

Chewing on the honeyed fruit, Mu Hanzhang said, “Frankly, if Your Highness wishes to win over Doctor Jiang, it’s not impossible.”

“Oh?” Jing Shao turned to him with interest.

A wave of weakness washed over Mu Hanzhang suddenly, and he leaned back against the bolster pillow at the head of the bed. “Recruit him into Your Highness’s forces, lure him into committing some sort of wrong, and then all Your Highness has to do is wait for him to come and beg for your help.”

“Junqing…” Jing Shao stared at him in surprise. He didn’t know much about the Academy of Medicine’s internal politics; he’d only sought out Jiang Heng because he was infamously impervious to persuasion and especially discreet. The only reason he’d given Doctor Jiang a gift today was because he intended to ask him to help maintain Junqing’s health in the future. If there was actually a way to bring someone like that into his camp, that really would be a pleasant surprise.

He suddenly lunged forward, sprawling over Mu Hanzhang’s chest. “You really are a strategist! With you around, I won’t have to spend money on retainers!” That Mu Hanzhang was willing to lend his scheming ability to him meant that he’d accepted him!

Mu Hanzhang coughed. “Your Highness!” With the hefty man draped over him, Mu Hanzhang suddenly found it hard to breathe.

Jing Shao bolted to his feet the moment he complained; then after laughing awkwardly, he said, “Don’t sit up anymore; lie back down. You need to sweat out your fever.”

He stuffed Mu Hanzhang under the covers, and even made sure to tuck him all the way in. Then, he lay down beside him, wrapping both Mu Hanzhang and the quilt into his embrace.

All this fussing left Mu Hanzhang stunned and bewildered, and by the time he realized what was happening, he’d been wrapped into a cocoon with an octopus latched around the outside, holding it all in place. He didn’t know whether he should laugh or cry—Jing Shao truly was an impatient man.

Mu Hanzhang’s face was pressed close against Jing Shao’s chest. He sighed and curled inward, trying to create a little distance.

“Junqing, I’ll tell you everything from now on, and you have to tell me whatever you’re thinking as well. This way, we won’t ever fight.” Jing Shao raised a hand to untie the hair ribbon holding Mu Hanzhang’s topknot, then nuzzled his chin over the crown of his head.

“Mm-hmm…” Mu Hanzhang mumbled a vague reply. He was wrapped up nice and warm, and the tension in his heart had eased. It was making him feel a bit drowsy.

“Junqing, on our wedding night, I honestly *was* upset and drank too much. At first, I thought since no one intended to trust me anyway, then I might as well live up to expectations and burn it all down.” Jing Shao narrowed his eyes. He really had considered it, when he had first awoken in the past. Knowing what he knew now, it wouldn’t be impossible for him to take that path. “But when I woke up and saw you, I changed my mind.”

Mu Hanzhang didn’t answer him, but his ears pricked up, listening to every word.

Hearing no response from the man in his arms, Jing Shao thought he’d fallen asleep, and he stroked his long hair gently. “I thought: If I get to spend a lifetime with someone as wonderful as you, that’s a pretty good thing. Whether other people believe in me doesn’t really matter. I promise to protect you from now on, and I won’t let you suffer any slight…”

He wasn’t sure yet exactly what he felt for the man in his arms, but he knew that Mu Hanzhang was the only one willing to die with him. In this world where he had been reborn, there was only suspicion and danger lurking behind every corner. This man was his only salvation. He must hold on tight and never let him go again.

His low, deep voice flowed through Mu Hanzhang like a gentle whisper. Jing Shao thought he was saying these things to himself, yet unbeknownst to him, the man in his embrace quietly smiled.

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BY THE TIME Mu Hanzhang had sweated out his fever, it was already past High Noon. Jing Shao had asked Duofu to run to the second prince’s estate a while

ago to apologize and tell his brother exactly what had happened, adding that they might try to head over a little later. Though the imperial lineage was vast, Jing Shao's special position meant he wasn't required to greet all that many people on the day after his wedding. Moreover, he had never been great at maintaining relationships anyway, so he had decided to visit only with his older brother. Now that High Noon had passed, it was impossible to go today, so he had changed into his casual clothes to sit down with his wife for a pleasant lunch.

But then, just as the table had been cleared, Duofu came to announce the second prince and his imperial consort's arrival. The second Jing Shao heard this, he immediately set down his teacup, ready to rush out.

"Your Highness!" Mu Hanzhang quickly pulled him back. "Change your clothes before you go."

"Oh!" Jing Shao smacked himself on the forehead—he'd forgotten that his sister-in-law was also present. Going out as he was would have been a breach of etiquette, so he hurriedly changed. He hadn't thought about it when he'd woken up, but now that he was going to see his older brother so soon, he realized he had a lot he wanted to tell him. He would not continue to be a fool this time around.

"Your Highness, this one will remain here." Mu Hanzhang pulled back the hand Jing Shao had just grabbed.

"What's the matter?" Jing Shao stopped in his tracks and turned to him. Greeting his older brother meant Mu Hanzhang would have to kneel and serve tea again, but he'd get a welcome gift out of it as well.

Mu Hanzhang's lips pinched together. "The reason Your High-ness did not go to the second prince's estate was because this one was ill. Even though he is your brother, to create a misunderstanding due to such a trivial matter wouldn't be worth it."

"Huh?" Jing Shao stared blankly, practically manifesting question marks over his head.

That was until he realized that Junqing was worried that if Jing Chen saw that Mu Hanzhang was fine, he would believe that Jing Shao had intentionally skipped his visit to the second prince's estate, which would damage the harmony between the two brothers.

He could only smile helplessly and wreathe his arms around Mu Hanzhang's waist. "Junqing, from now on, you should speak more directly. This brain of mine doesn't work all that well."

Mu Hanzhang shot him a glance and whispered, "This one will keep that in mind. Go on, Your Highness."

He knew that Jing Shao shared a tight bond with this particular directly related elder brother, and if he'd said that outright, he could be suspected of trying to put a wedge between them. As he was currently still an outsider who'd just joined the family, it would be better if he was cautious about what he said.

Noticing how quickly he'd replied, Jing Shao couldn't help but tease him. "Which one are you keeping in mind, speaking more directly or that my brain doesn't work great?"

"Both." Mu Hanzhang's expression remained placid.

Jing Shao found how unfazed he was in the face of change inexplicably attractive. He looked around, and once he'd made sure that no one was paying them any attention, he gave Mu Hanzhang a quick peck on the cheek before dashing out the door.

Mu Hanzhang stared at Jing Shao's retreating figure and slowly brushed a hand over his cheek. He couldn't help that the corner of his lips curled upward.

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DUE TO THE ABRUPTNESS of Jing Chen's visit, Jing Shao wasn't able to greet him at the door in time, so Duofu had invited him and his consort to the tea room inside the Zephyr Pavilion—where Jing Shao entertained guests, read, and generally spent his leisure time. It was considered part of the inner quarters and usually only used to entertain close friends or family.

The front portion of the Prince Cheng Estate was the outer quarters, past the ornamental gardens was Zephyr Pavilion, and the area behind Zephyr Pavilion was divided into the east and west wings. The east wing was Jing Shao's residence, while the women in the residence lived in the west wing. However, since Mu Hanzhang was a man, he couldn't live in the west wing, and therefore the east wing now housed the newlyweds—which also meant Jing Shao no longer had a living quarters to himself. This was the established norm with noble houses that took a gentleman wife: both halves of the couple living in the master living quarters, their residence separated from the concubines'.

The closer he got to the tea room, the more excited Jing Shao became. His pace involuntarily quickened, and before he even got inside, he was already calling out exuberantly. "Brother!"

The tea room was elegantly furnished. Its exquisite tables, chairs, and decorative side tables were of Jiangnan style, and aside from the supporting pillars, all of the walls were removable intricately carved panels. The panels could remain in place, creating a small room that heated up quickly in the winter, while in the summertime they could be removed, turning the room into an airy, cozy pavilion. Seasonal flowers sat on the flower racks, and delicate vines twined over the supporting pillars, already budding, their fresh leaves green studded with pale yellow, brimming with life.

Chapter 6:
Concubines of the Harem

JING CHEN SET DOWN THE TEACUP in his hands, his brows drawing together slightly. As he watched Jing Shao coming in at a run, he couldn't help but reprimand him. "You're a married adult now, and still so impulsive—what a disgrace!"

Jing Shao reflexively stopped in his tracks, then shook his head with a wry smile. He had gotten so used to being scolded by his older brother ever since he was little that the very tone of his admonishment made Jing Shao immediately want to bolt. But now, the words "what a disgrace" felt so incredibly endearing that he wished for nothing more than to have his brother around to scold him like this for many more years to come. He strolled into the pavilion, and when his brother glared at him sternly, he couldn't help grinning as he stepped forward to greet him and his imperial consort.

"Brother," said his sister-in-law, Lady Xiao, rising from her seat beside Jing Chen to return his bow. Noticing that Jing Chen had remained silent and stone-faced, she smiled and said, "We weren't going to come, but when we heard that your consort was unwell and wasn't up to visiting even by the afternoon, your brother got worried, and he brought me along as well."

In an ordinary household, the morning after the wedding was for the couple to pay their respects to the groom's parents and elder brothers, while the afternoon was for the couples' relatives to meet. So even though their visit now could be seen as lowering their own status, it was still within the bounds of propriety.

Of course, Jing Shao had worked out all of this already, and when he heard his sister-in-law tell him as much, he looked up at his elder brother, whose brows were still slightly knitted, and felt a warm sensation flood his chest. How blind he'd been in his previous life to assume his brother's harsh demeanor toward him came from disapproval, never noticing how much his brother did for him behind the scenes.

Jing Shao slowly shuffled over to him, opening his mouth to speak, but he only managed to get out a single word: "Brother…"

Surprised, Jing Chen raised his head to look up at him in amazement. Ever since Father had decreed that Jing Shao was to marry the second son of Marquis Beiwei, this little brother he'd loved and protected since childhood had refused to call him "brother." Whenever they saw each other, Jing Shao would only greet him with "Your Highness," and it had torn at his heart. He hadn't expected Jing Shao to pay his respects today, but to his disbelief, the steward from the Prince Cheng Estate had arrived personally to apologize, which raised his hopes, even if just a little bit. As the afternoon went by without his brother making an appearance, he'd found himself unable to sit around any longer and had hurried over. He'd never expected such a pleasant surprise to be waiting for him.

Sensing there was much to say between the two brothers, Lady Xiao rose from her seat with a smile. "I will go check on the princely consort."

Jing Shao immediately stopped Lady Xiao. "Sister-in-law…Junqing isn't up yet. Why don't you wait here with my brother for a little bit, and I'll go call for him."

“Aiyoh, look at me. I’m getting all mixed up!” Lady Xiao stopped in her tracks, clutching a handkerchief in her hands in frustration, her face turning beet red. Since Princely Consort Cheng was a man, even though Lady Xiao was his sister-in-law, it would never make sense for her to visit him at his bedside.

On the other hand, Jing Chen, as his new elder brother, was perfectly able to head into the inner chambers to check on his new brother-in-law. Jing Chen cast a thoughtful look toward his own wife, then stood up and said, “Since he’s ill, let’s not make him move around. I’ll go check on him with you.”

Nearby, Duofu immediately whispered to one of the handmaidens to run and notify the princely consort at once.

The two brothers arrived at the east wing living quarters, where Mu Hanzhang was reclining on the daybed in the outer chamber, covered with a thin quilt. His outer garment was loose-fitting and made of a soft material, clearly meant to be worn at home, and although it was not quite formal, his belt was neatly tied. His manner of dress managed to signal that he was ill without appearing discourteous.

Taking in this tableau, Jing Chen quietly approved and stopped Mu Hanzhang from rising to bow.

“How is that you’re ill on the day after your wedding?”

Jing Chen turned to his little brother. When he’d heard that Mu Hanzhang had taken ill, his first reaction had been to wonder what might have happened this morning at the palace.

“Um…” Jing Shao coughed and rubbed his nose. No matter how thick his skin might be, his cheeks still burned a bit under his elder brother’s scrutinizing gaze.

Taking in Jing Shao’s flustered expression, Mu Hanzhang allowed himself a faint smile. “Your Highness, there’s no need to worry. It’s just a cold with a bit of a fever. The fever has already subsided with medicine.”

“Yes, that’s exactly right. Marquis Beiwei’s household is too stingy—those wedding robes they made for him are too thin,” Jing Shao quickly chimed in, unaware that his attempt to gloss things over only made it sound worse. Mu Hanzhang couldn’t help but roll his eyes.

Jing Chen sighed as he stared at his little brother. “Come to the study with me. I have something to tell you.”

And so, Jing Shao was dragged away dejected, hanging his head. Before he left, he stole a glance behind him and made sad puppy eyes at Mu Hanzhang.

Amused, Mu Hanzhang failed to stifle a laugh. How unexpected, that this man who was usually so taciturn and aloof would transform into a child before his older brother. He couldn’t help laughing.

He was a refined gentleman elegant as an orchid, and when a smile spread across his face, it was indescribably dazzling and captivating.

Having glimpsed Mu Hanzhang’s laughing face and the beauty of his expression, Jing Shao followed his brother to the study, ready to be lectured, feeling perfectly satisfied.

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"GREETINGS, SISTER."

Lady Xiao stared at the gracefully curtsying Song Lingxin before her, her brows furrowing. This woman was Jing Shao's secondary wife who had crossed the threshold two years ago. By that reasoning, Song Lingxin could indeed call her sister. However, despite the fact that the official princely consort had finally married into the household, this woman had shown up in the tea room, acting as if she were still the mistress of the house. Not only that, but she wore a pink Su brocade skirt, and her tasseled pearl-beaked golden phoenix hairpin swayed with each step she took. Such flamboyance!

Lady Xiao still felt anxious about the way Jing Chen had glared at her earlier, and Song Lingxin's appearance now only made her more vexed. Without holding back, she asked straightforwardly, "What are you doing here?"

"With Their Highnesses off in their own discussion, this one thought it must be dull for you to drink tea here all on your own. So, this one had some light refreshments prepared in the floral parlor and came here with an invitation to try some." Song Lingxin's invitation was worded cleverly, intentionally vague to make it sound as if Jing Shao had given her permission to entertain his brother's wife.

Lady Xiao gave this some thought. Since it was inappropriate for Princely Consort Cheng to entertain her because he was a man, it seemed proper for the secondary wife to come drink tea with her. Moreover, since the two brothers had been gone for so long, they must have had important matters to discuss. And so, she rose and followed Lady Song to the west wing.

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"YOUNG MASTER, I heard that the second imperial consort went to the floral parlor for tea with Madam Song," Lanting whispered as she topped up Mu Hanzhang's cup with fresh tea.

"Oh?" From his reclining position on the daybed, Mu Hanzhang looked up from his book and gazed at the nervous young girl with amusement. "Where did you hear that?"

Lanting was clever enough, but she was very young and hadn't yet spent enough time with him, leaving her inevitably somewhat timid. Since she'd actually taken the initiative to gather information today, he felt it appropriate to give her a bit of encouragement.

"I heard Miss Mengxi talking about it when I went to the tea pantry for more water." Lanting bit at her lower lip, indignance crossing her features. The other handmaiden's gossip had sounded like she was complimenting Madam Song, as though she were taking pleasure in Young Master Mu's awkward predicament of being left on his own.

Mu Hanzhang nodded. "Good work." He returned his attention to the book.

“But young master.” Lanting was exceedingly dissatisfied with her young master’s disinterested attitude. “You have no idea what Mengxi said.”

Mu Hanzhang looked up reluctantly and said in an even tone, “She must have said, ‘It’s only the day after the princely consort married into the household, and he’s already been overshadowed by Madam Song. Who can even tell which one of them is in charge around here now?’ Correct?”

Lanting’s eyes went wide with astonishment. “Young master, how did you know that?”

Mu Hanzhang laughed softly and shook his head. This silly girl had it all written all over her face; it would have been more difficult for him not to know.

Zhixi entered to deliver a message. “Reporting to Your High-ness, His Highness has instructed me to inform you that he will be eating dinner with His Highness the second prince, and he has asked you to go ahead and dine here without waiting for him.” She then asked the servant carrying food boxes to set up the meal in the outer chamber.

“Understood.” Mu Hanzhang put the book down and sat at the dining table. He’d had no appetite at noon due to fever, but now he was indeed a little hungry.

Zhixi stood before the table to serve him. He picked up the rice bowl before staring at the exquisite dishes spread out on the table; the banquet was truly far more extravagant than the food served in the Marquis Beiwei Estate. Marrying His Highness even meant that he would never need to appease a mother-in-law every day. If it was a woman that married into the Prince Cheng Estate, she would have surely been happy, wouldn’t she?

The gentle smile on Jing Shao’s face surfaced in his mind, and Mu Hanzhang couldn’t help but sigh. If he’d been Marquis Beiwei’s common-born daughter, he would never have had the standing to marry Prince Cheng. Even now, he still had no idea if all this was fortune or calamity.

“Zhixi, is there a map of this estate?” Picking up his teacup, Mu Hanzhang asked this like an afterthought once he finished his dinner.

Replying respectfully, Zhixi said, “To answer Your Highness: Yes, there is one in the small study. I’ll go look around for it right away.” The small study she referred to was in the east wing too, not far from them. She returned quickly with the map.

That Zhixi could so easily retrieve something from the study astonished Mu Hanzhang. Was Jing Shao actually letting him freely peruse whatever was in there? The young girl hadn’t even sought Jing Shao’s permission. It was difficult to believe he’d allow such behavior. Of course, Mu Hanzhang could have been overthinking it, as the small study might not contain any important secrets at all.

He slowly unrolled the scroll. The illustrator’s intricate style depicted a retouched blueprint, with the room plans of the estate laid out at a glance. The ornamental gardens and Zephyr Pavilion separated the estate into the outer and inner courts, and within the Zephyr Pavilion there was a tea room, study, heated nook, and waterside pavilion, as well as many other buildings. The inner court was divided into the eastern and western garden complexes, with the east being Jing Shao’s residence, while his female consorts were housed in the west. As Mu Hanzhang wasn’t a woman, he could not live in the west wing, and so he resided with Jing Shao.

His gaze wandered over the entire scroll, finally settling on the *Bamboo Floral Parlor*. That was probably the floral parlor they spoke of, situated in the center of the west wing. Mu Hanzhang rolled the scroll back up. As he was a man, having the secondary wife entertain his sister-in-law on his behalf was appropriate, certainly. However, whether this was Jing Shao's wish or Madam Song's own volition carried rather different implications.

Mengxi walked in through the door, grinning as she said, "Your Highness, the two concubines from the west wing have come to pay their respects and to serve you tea."

With surreptitious glances, she observed Mu Hanzhang and waited for his reaction.

"Hmm?" A slight frown found itself on Mu Hanzhang's face. Prince Cheng had one secondary wife and two concubines, which he'd known about before their marriage. If both concubines were here to pay their respects, why hadn't the "considerate, tactful" Madam Song shown her face yet? Was she trying to make a show of her power, or was she trying to sound out His Highness's stance?

His lips curled into a disdainful smile. The petty tricks played by these women were utterly pointless. At his leisure, he rose to dress into a set of sapphire blue casual clothes, forcing the two concubines to wait in the side parlor. He chose not to wear a headdress, only asking Lanting to tie up his hair with a matching hair ribbon. It was only once this was done that he called in the two concubines.

Even Zhixi couldn't help but feel concerned. *Madam Song hasn't gone to see the guests off with His Highness, has she?* Out-wardly, though, Zhixi smiled and introduced the concubines to Mu Hanzhang.

The princely concubine, Lady Liu, wore a goosedown-yellow skirt and had soft, alluring features, while the serving concubine, Lady Li, was petite and clever-looking and dressed in a jade-green skirt.

Chapter 7:
Homecoming

"GREETINGS, YOUR HIGHNESS. Yanji is here to serve you tea." The princely concubine, Lady Liu, gracefully got down on her knees and kowtowed to Mu Hanzhang. Taking the teacup from the handmaiden, she then presented the tea with both hands. All the while, her charming face remained docile and expressionless.

Mu Hanzhang took a sip of tea, rewarded her with a string of South Sea pearls, and did not give her leave to rise until she accepted them.

"Here's a kowtow for Your Highness. Congratulations on the joyful occasion of your marriage," Lady Li said, her tone light and cheerful, immediately endearing.

As a serving concubine, Lady Li couldn't refer to herself as "this one." However, since she'd been a maid, this humble manner of speech seemed quite natural for her.

"Do rise." Mu Hanzhang set down the teacup and rewarded Lady Li a pair of golden bird hairpins. Women's accessories were of course not a part of his dowry, and neither were those from the Beiwei Estate likely to provide such things for him. These were secretly given to him by his birth mother on the night before he was wed, lest he should be looked down upon by the concubines.

The lavishness of the princely consort's gifts had forced Mengxi to give up on her initial intention of coming here to watch him embarrass himself. No wonder other people said marrying a common-born son was worth more money than marrying a legitimate-born daughter; even a legitimate daughter could only be given a dowry when she was married off, while a common son was given a share of the family property as he was due.

Mu Hanzhang lowered his eyes and said unhurriedly, "I am a man, so from now on, consider this in what etiquette you choose in how you act and speak to me. For dawn and dusk reflections, just come to pay your respects; I do not otherwise need you to wait on me." His clear and mellow voice was quite pleasant, but the steady pace at which he spoke bore an unyielding authority.

The two concubines immediately curtsied, replying with a "Certainly." The playful expression fell from Lady Li's face.

"If there's nothing else, you may go," Mu Hanzhang said, indifferent.

Liu Yanji glanced at Lady Li, whose eyes darted back and forth.

Smiling, Lady Li said, "Thank you, Your Highness. But Madam Song hasn't come yet, so we'll just wait outside your door. That way, we can go back to the west wing together." The implication was clear: The show wasn't over yet—it would be a shame to miss it.

A cold glint briefly flashed through Mu Hanzhang's lowered eyes. These women's convoluted schemes were starting to try his patience. Just as he was about to tell them to wait in the side parlor, a burst of laughter sounded from a woman outside the door.

The source of this voice gradually grew louder in approach. "This one hasn't ever seen you like this before, Your Highness…"

Jing Shao stepped through the door before the speaker, a hint of a smile still on his face. However, when he noticed those currently present in the room, his expression immediately froze over.

No wonder Song Lingxin had insisted on walking with him when he ran into her along the way. She was using him as an excuse for her lateness in paying respects to Mu Hanzhang. The other concubines were already here, but not her—who was she trying to impress? The elation he'd felt from an afternoon of delightful conversation with his brother fizzled away.

Naturally, Mu Hanzhang caught the shift in Jing Shao's expression. *Just as I suspected, this Madam Song is rather favored.* This thought made him involuntarily press his lips together.

"All the girls are here!" said Song Lingxin in feigned surprise. Dressed in a bright water lily-pink skirt, she walked up to Mu Hanzhang and curtsied. "Apologies for my lateness, as this one had to see off the imperial consort. Please don't hold it against me, *Gege*."[4]

Gege…

Hearing this form of address from her made Mu Hanzhang's temples throb. Certainly, a secondary wife was allowed to call the primary wife jiejie, so following this reasoning, since he was a man, she ought to call him gege. Why, then, did it feel so wrong?

Before Mu Hanzhang could say anything, Jing Shao cut ahead of him. "From now on, you must address him as Your Highness. You're not allowed to call him gege."

"Your Highness?" The hurt on Lady Song's face was clear for all to see. To call him gege was her privilege as a secondary wife. Demanding this of her was tantamount to a slap in the face in front of the princely consort.

Jing Shao apparently failed to notice her distress. He was too busy being irritated by how "gege" coming from her sounded like she was addressing Mu Hanzhang as a lover, which felt like a stab in the ear to him no matter the context. Unconcerned with how anyone might react, Jing Shao leaned back on the daybed, picked up the book Mu Hanzhang had half finished, and began to read.

Having been snubbed, all Song Lingxin could do was crouch down submissively in a half kowtow and serve Mu Hanzhang tea. In return, he rewarded her with a pair of jade bracelets of the finest quality and style. Song Lingxin was slightly taken aback—perhaps this common son of Marquis Beiwei's wasn't as unwelcome at home as the rumors suggested?

Uninterested in what these women thought of him, Mu Hanzhang sent them back to the west wing after a few words of admonition. Even though these concubines were all quite attractive, he couldn't forget they were his husband's women. The thought made him feel exceedingly uneasy, and he couldn't bring himself to appreciate them no matter how beautiful they might be.

Everything finally quieted down. Mu Hanzhang found facing these women for just a moment far more taxing than reading all day. Since Jing Shao had taken his book, he asked Lanxuan to fetch him a different one.

"Young master, *Commentary on the Classic of Clear Waters* is in a big box in the treasury. It's dark now, so it'll be hard to find," said Lanxuan hesitantly.

When the estate had been built, they'd naturally not reserved space for a study for the "princely consort." However, this particular consort had a lot of books, and the bedroom only had room for the few he read most often. The rest were stored in the treasury.

Mu Hanzhang sighed lightly and waved a hand. "Never mind. Just pick one at random from the small case." Lanxuan lacked the skill of tact. Phrasing it as bluntly as she had made it seem as if he'd been trying to complain through her to His Highness.

When Jing Shao looked up and saw the slight furrow in his brow, he couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

"No need to get another. I was only flipping through it." Then, he offered the book out toward Mu Hanzhang, his hand hanging in the air. It left Mu Hanzhang no choice but to walk over to take it—only for Jing Shao to yank him right onto the daybed.

Caught unawares, Mu Hanzhang ended up sprawled on top of Jing Shao. Blushing immediately, he struggled to free himself. "Your Highness!"

Laughing, Jing Shao sat up, but he kept one arm around Mu Hanzhang and refused to let go. "Sit on the daybed with me. We'll read together."

Taking this as a cue, Zhixi led the handmaidens out of the room with a sly smile. That only made Mu Hanzhang's face turn a deeper crimson. Apparently entirely oblivious, the man behind him leaned forward and rested his chin on his shoulder. "How are you feeling this afternoon? Still bad?"

The spot Jing Shao rested his chin on itched. Mu Hanzhang shifted uncomfortably. "I'm much better."

"Don't mind those concubines. Lady Li was arranged for me by the palace when I was little, and Yanji was granted to me last year by first brother—I've never touched her." Jing Shao shifted the man in his arms up slightly to let Mu Hanzhang lie on him more comfortably, lessening the strain on his lower back.

Having multiple wives and concubines had never bothered Jing Shao before, but in the face of Junqing's seemingly all-seeing dark eyes, he felt a bit guilty for some reason, and he had overexplained himself without even being prompted.

Mu Hanzhang turned to look at him. Was this man trying to help him understand the true status of the women in the harem, in order to facilitate his management? Even though he truly had no interest in governing these women at all, this knowledge was indeed useful for his survival here.

After pondering for a moment, he said softly, "Regarding the imperial consort's visit today, that was this one's oversight. Fortunately, Madam Song was vigilant, and we avoided potential insult to Older Brother and Sister-in-Law."

"Ha ha, I forgot all about Sister-in-Law too and only remembered her during dinner." As he thought back to the frank conversation he'd had with his brother in the study today, a smile resurfaced on his face.

Mu Hanzhang understood now. *Looks like Madam Song was acting on her own.*

Jing Shao looked down and noticed the man in his arms was still deep in thought. Suddenly, it dawned on him that Mu Hanzhang had just praised Song Lingxin. The smile on his face immediately vanished. What was so good about that

woman? Junqing hadn't even praised *him* for being vigilant yet.

"Song Lingxin's father is the vice-minister of war. I only brought her into the household because I was worried that someone might sabotage me when I marched off on a campaign."

Despite his intent, his tone grew increasingly icy as he spoke. In his previous life, when everyone conspired against him, Song An, who had been promoted to the minister of war by then, kept his head down the entire time and refused to defend him even once. In the end, he even used deceptive means to get a Writ of Divorce in order to protect his daughter, and that woman had also abandoned him, leaving his estate as though running for her life.

Even cats and dogs would risk their lives to protect their master, but as for her, if it weren't for the law that sent women who exposed their husband's crimes to prison, she would have undoubtedly already taken any evidence of his guilt she could find and run to her father to get credit.

Mu Hanzhang quietly listened to his husband and easily noticed his displeasure toward Song Lingxin. In his handsome eyes, there was a loneliness Jing Shao himself hadn't even realized was there. Mu Hanzhang couldn't resist reaching for the corner of his eye, though he had no idea what he was going to do next.

Overjoyed by this gesture from the man in his arms, Jing Shao dared not move a muscle. Mu Hanzhang touched his face gingerly like a cat, while Jing Shao held his breath lest he should disturb him. When all he did was place a fingertip on the corner of his eye before stopping entirely, Jing Shao couldn't help but angle his head slightly, placing a gentle kiss on that supple palm.

Mu Hanzhang came back to himself and let out a soft exclamation as if startled. He quickly drew back before springing off the daybed.

"We have the homecoming rites tomorrow, so let's…let's get some rest as early as we can," he said, feigning composure, and then turned around and stepped into the inner chamber.

A muffled chuckle escaped Jing Shao despite himself as he stared at the back of the man's fleeing figure. He then stood up as well and followed suit.

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"YOUR HIGHNESS, what happened today really wasn't this one's intention." In the carriage on its way back to their estate, Lady Xiao watched her husband anxiously.

Jing Chen shot her a look, then said in a low tone, "Whether it was intentional or not, you need to remember this. Jing Shao is my dear little brother, and I'll stop anyone trying to destroy him, by any means." *Even Father!* The last sentence was left unsaid, but Lady Xiao could tell he'd implied it.

She quickly answered with a "Certainly," but secretly, she was deeply worried. *Just because you treat him like a brother doesn't mean he'll necessarily appreciate it.*

Meanwhile, Jing Chen couldn't help but smile with gratification as he thought about what his little brother had said in the study. His little Shao-er was finally all

grown up.

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TWO DAYS AFTER the day of the wedding came the homecoming when it was time to visit the bride's parents. The Prince Cheng couple had risen early to get ready.

"Your Highness…" Inside the carriage, Mu Hanzhang faltered, pursed his lips, then bit back his words.

"Hm?" Turning to check, Jing Shao saw Mu Hanzhang looking hesitant. He reached out to take his tightly clenched hand into his own. "Junqing, do you remember what I told you yesterday?"

Mu Hanzhang looked up, meeting Jing Shao's dark eyes, filled with tenderness, and the tension gripping his heart fell away. "If my father brings up the salt permits in Jiangnan, Your Highness…don't say yes."

Salt permits? Only once reminded did Jing Shao recall that Marquis Beiwei had indeed wanted to use him to get involved with the salt trade. Salt had always been controlled by the government, or to be precise, by the hands of a few provincial governors. Since Jiangnan was where salt was produced, and Jing Shao was on good terms with the regional commander of Jiangnan, there were many people who wanted to use him to get involved with the salt trade. However…this had also been one of the charges brought against him in his first life.

Chapter 8:
The Marquis Beiwei Estate

UPON HEARING MU HANZHANG'S ADVICE, Jing Shao felt warmth spread through his heart, yet he couldn't help teasing him a little. "I'm surprised that people who don't side with their parents actually exist."

Mu Hanzhang pulled his hand back and turned his attention outside the window, ignoring him.

Jing Shao smiled, before deciding to simply lie down on the seat of their spacious carriage. He sighed. "I've always been bad at considering the consequences of my actions. Junqing, you must keep reminding me from now on. Otherwise, my foolish impulses are going to end up losing me this head of mine sooner or later."

Mu Hanzhang remained silent for some time. Just as Jing Shao thought that he wasn't going to speak again, he heard him murmur an assent. Inspired, Jing Shao wriggled over to Mu Hanzhang's side like a giant python and wrapped his arms around that slender waist in order to nuzzle his face against it. "Junqing, tell me about what things are like at the Beiwei Estate, so I can be a bit more prepared."

That big head snuggling at his back made him so tense that his spine was ramrod straight, and Mu Hanzhang was forced to turn around so that he could pry off the man clinging to him. Jing Shao released him willingly, then took advantage of the new position by resting his head on Mu Hanzhang's thigh instead.

Wordlessly looking down at that smug, entitled man, Mu Han-zhang could only feel a profound sense of futility as he fulfilled Jing Shao's request for information.

Many people resided in the Beiwei Estate. Mu Hanzhang's father was the current Marquis Beiwei, and as the Marquis's mother—the matriarch of the family—was still alive, they had yet to divide their property among her children, therefore Mu Hanzhang's uncles also lived there. His branch of the family was not prolific. Marquise Beiwei had a pair of children, and then there was him, the common-born son. None of the other concubines had provided offspring.

"Well then, your dad seems rather faithful." Jing Shao turned his face up at him, catching a glimpse of the elegant contour of his jaw and the motion of the delicate jut of his throat.

"Perhaps…" Mu Hanzhang didn't wish to dwell on this subject any further. "The family dynamics are rather complicated, and if there's anyone you don't want to deal with, feel free to just ignore them." Over these two days, he had discovered that Jing Shao was not particularly adept at handling social interactions, especially when they involved the convoluted politics of nobles, so he couldn't resist giving him a few more pointers.

I'm an imperial prince. What, do you think anyone will dare try to push me around? Jing Shao wanted to laugh at him for being a worrywart, but when the words left his mouth they'd turned into "I understand."

Before long, they arrived at the Beiwei Estate. The two straightened their clothes and alighted hand in hand as they left the carriage. Mu Hanzhang tried to pull

his hand out of Jing Shao's grasp, but alas, he was no match for that grip. Not wanting to make a scene, he had no choice but to let Jing Shao have his way.

"This one, Mu Jin, along with everyone in the Marquis Beiwei Estate, welcomes Your Highnesses!" Mu Jin stood at the forefront and led everyone in the family to kneel and kowtow.

While it was customary for a new son-in-law to come pay his respects to his wife's parents, if this son-in-law was a member of the imperial family, then the family of his wife must pay their respects to him instead.

Looking down at the uncles and brothers kneeling before him, Mu Hanzhang couldn't quite describe what he was feeling. But fortunately, Jing Shao never let go of his hand, as though telling him, *Don't be afraid. I've got your back.* In the past, he had always thought of achieving high honors in the imperial exams in a bid to earn the respect of these people. Now it seemed he'd achieved that goal, although in a roundabout, peculiar way. At the very least, no one would dare mistreat him inside Beiwei Estate anymore.

As Jing Shao felt his hand slowly being squeezed back just as tightly, his eyes lit up with a smile. He spoke loudly to prompt everyone to rise, and then Marquis Beiwei led them inside.

Most of Mu Jin's brothers were common-born and could not inherit the title, so the one who stood next to him was his legitimate firstborn son Mu Lingbao, who had already been named as the heir two years ago with His Majesty's blessing.

Mu Lingbao's skin was fair and delicate, but perhaps because the Spring Festival had just passed, he appeared to have gained some weight. Since Mu Jin was walking with Jing Shao, Mu Lingbao stepped into stride with Mu Hanzhang. "Brother, will you be sitting in the inner quarters with mother or in the front court with us at the banquet later?" His expression was characteristically arrogant and mocking.

"As the heir, Brother, you should be more familiar with such etiquette than myself." Mu Hanzhang didn't even give him the dignity of a glance. He continued to walk slowly forward, carrying himself with a distinguished air.

Observing his attire and demeanor, Mu Lingbao itched down to his teeth with jealousy. *Did this brat manage to stumble into a stroke of good fortune by pure accident?*

Mu Jin shot his eldest son a glare, then smiled at Jing Shao and said, "It's still early yet. Please, come with this one to the front parlor for some tea. Let the princely consort go see his mother, and after that, he can join us for the banquet."

Jing Shao glanced at the man next to him, and when he saw him nod, he slowly released the hand he was holding. "You're still sick. Don't tire yourself too much."

"Certainly," Mu Hanzhang responded and sent a gentle smile his way before following Mu Lingbao to the inner court. Zhixi, Lanting, and several other handmaidens as well as two young eunuchs followed closely behind, creating a rather impressive procession.

Naturally, Mu Jin had noticed the interactions between the two from the moment they alighted from the carriage, and he was rather surprised that not only had Jing Shao not taken out his anger on Mu Hanzhang, but he'd even given him his favor. Marquis Beiwei breathed a sigh of relief and felt even more confident of potential business opportunities through the prince. The smile on his face grew more

radiant.

"Wow, look at that! Our Princely Consort is back." Mu Hanzhang could tell this was his ever so chatty Third Aunt without looking. He paid the voice no mind and headed straight for the principal residence, stopping in front of its doors.

Zhixi stood next to Mu Hanzhang and rather regally addressed those gathered. "The princely consort is here for his homecoming. Only a curtsy is required, my ladies."

The aunts and cousins in the room were all brought up short. It had only just occurred to them that this man had already become Princely Consort Cheng, First-rank Proper, and was no longer that unfavored common-born son.

Marquise Beiwei, Lady Du, smiled, stood up from the main seat, and led the womenfolk in a curtsy. "We respectfully welcome Princely Consort Cheng on his homecoming."

"Mother, please rise." Mu Hanzhang stepped forward to help his principal mother stand, prompting the others to rise as well.

Very satisfied with Mu Hanzhang's attitude, Marquise Beiwei reached out to take his hand and led him to the main seat to sit alongside her. As Mu Hanzhang looked around, he noticed that of the concubines standing behind Marquise Beiwei, but three were present. The only one missing was his birth mother.

"Are you getting used to life in the Prince Cheng Estate?" asked Lady Du. She seemed in no rush to tell him about his birth mother, instead inquiring about the kinds of things a primary mother was expected to ask.

"To answer Mother, everything is wonderful." Mu Hanzhang was worried about his birth mother, but he wasn't allowed to ask about her, for it would be disrespectful to his primary mother. "How is your health of late?"

Since she'd given birth to a daughter, Lady Du's health had never been the same. She was much thinner than the average woman and so angular that even her smiles were pointed with sharpness and severity. "Thank you for asking. My health is rather robust, actually. Concubine Qiu, however, fell ill just the other day, and without her by my side, it's so hard for me to get anything done."

Hidden in his sleeve, Mu Hanzhang's hand clenched into a fist, but his face remained impassive. "With you watching over her, I'm sure she'll recover. It just so happens that His Highness asked me to bring back some snow ginseng for Mother and the other concubines' health." As he spoke, he signaled the young eunuch behind him to present a box of snow ginseng.

A cold glint flashed in Marquise Beiwei's eyes, but still smiling, she asked her handmaiden to accept it. "His Lordship told us that you were to attend the banquet in the front parlor at High Noon. I'm sure it must be boring to sit around with a bunch of women like us, so you should take this opportunity to visit with Concubine Qiu."

Once Mu Hanzhang left with his entourage, Marquise Beiwei's expression immediately turned cold.

"Well, well, this brat's sure gotten bold," sneered the third madam. "He knows how to use the prince to threaten you now." She gave a sycophantic look toward the woman on the main seat.

"Nothing much will come out of that." Lady Du wiped the corner of her mouth with a handkerchief and rose languidly. "Come, we must get ready for the banquet as

well.”

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JING SHAO STOOD in Marquis Beiwei’s study with his hands behind his back, fascinated by a painting on the wall. The long scroll occupied half of the wall and depicted nine weapons with a line of text above them. *…as the Nine Sacred Relics…three sabers, first called Numinous Treasure, second Latent Radiance, third Unadorned Grace;*[5] *two daggers…named for their form, inscribed with their names.*

“Does Your Highness also love weapons?” Mu Jin asked, smiling.

“Sacred relics choose their master. If it doesn’t belong to you, then it’s only good for looking at. It can’t slay your enemies.” Jing Shao turned to Marquis Beiwei and gave him a meaningful look.

“Your Highness is an expert, indeed.” Mu Jin smiled and didn’t continue the conversation Jing Shao had started, instead going on a tangent. “Hanzhang was never fond of weapons even as a child and tended to be dull and socially awkward. If he has done anything inappropriate, I hope Your Highness won’t hold it against him.”

“Junqing is wonderful,” Jing Shao said flatly and turned back to observe the painting again. The saber called Latent Radiance in the center radiated brilliance, as splendid as the glow of sunrise. It was placed across from the one named Unadorned Grace, and the inscription read: *Latent Radiance; Unadorned Grace; remains as untainted as ice, and as deep as an abyss.*[6]

For all that an incense stick would have burned down by now, Jing Shao had yet to ask why Mu Jin had brought him to the study. He had instead deliberately steered clear of the subject, giving him only vague answers. It was making Mu Jin a little anxious. The rumors about Prince Cheng spoke of a hotheaded man quick to anger and lacking patience, yet before him now stood someone as calm as an undisturbed lake, exuding an aura of decisive ruthlessness, utterly unlike a youth who had yet to reach twenty.

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AFTER BEING LED by a handmaiden to the small courtyard where Concubine Qiu resided, Mu Hanzhang had Zhixi send her off with some silver bits and then walked alone inside. The Beiwei Estate was nowhere near as grand as Prince Cheng’s, and an entire branch of the family resided in the same courtyard compound. The concubines were only allotted these small courtyards with two buildings in each. But although they were called courtyards, the only open space was the gap between the concubines’ houses.

“Qiulan, is the second young master in the inner court?” A familiar voice came from the house, interrupted by a light cough.

“Yes, I heard he’s talking to the Marquise.”

Qiulan then emerged from the door with a pot in hand, on her way to fetch hot water. She ran right into Mu Hanzhang, and, startled, she exclaimed, “Young master!”

With a nod, Mu Hanzhang raised the curtain and stepped inside. It wasn’t as bad as he was imagining; Concubine Qiu was sitting up, leaning against pillows at the head of the bed, in the midst of some embroidery, though she was currently holding a finger. When Qiulan had cried out, she’d accidentally pricked herself.

“Why are you still embroidering when you’re sick?” Mu Hanzhang strode over to her side.

Concubine Qiu sucked away the bead of blood on her fingertip and looked at him with a dreamy smile. “I just have to avoid drafty rooms, that’s all. Embroidering won’t hurt me. Are you doing well at the prince’s estate, young master…” As she trailed off, she began to cry, unable to hold it in anymore.

“I’m doing fine; there’s no need to worry. His Highness, he’s…very good to me…” Mu Hanzhang said slowly, biting his lower lip. He took the handkerchief from Concubine Qiu’s hands and wiped her tears. “He assigned me a pageboy and bodyguards, gave me permission to leave the house, and he hasn’t taken his anger out on me at all.”

“Is that really true?” Concubine Qiu was skeptical, as Prince Cheng was known for his terrible temper.

“He’s… As a matter of fact, he’s quite different from what everyone thinks of him.” As he reflected on their interactions over the past two days, a trace of a smile appeared on his face. “I really am doing very well, Mom…”

Chapter 9:
A Token of Gratitude

WHEN CONCUBINE QIU heard him call her "Mom," the tears she'd just managed to quell before once again returned. "This is all my fault for being so useless. If I wasn't just a concubine, you would have never had to suffer so much."

All these years, whenever she saw her son, she'd had to bow and call him young master. Even if her son wanted to call her "Mom," he had to do it in secret. This pain could only be understood by those who experienced it firsthand.

Concubine Qiu began her life as the legitimate daughter of a generational merchant family in Jiangnan. In order to leverage Marquis Beiwei's power for their business, the Qiu family married her to him as a concubine. At first, she garnered Marquise Beiwei's favor with her excellent bookkeeping skills, and her life in the estate was passable. She diligently served Lady Du every day, only hoping that her son would have a good life. But now, her heartbreakingly considerate child had been deprived of the right to take the Civil Service Examination, forced to marry a brutal prince. How could she avoid feeling upset and resentful?

Seeing his once bold and cheerful mother becoming like this, Mu Hanzhang felt terrible. He held his mother—much thinner than he remembered—in his arms and said, "Marrying His Highness might turn out to be a good thing. Joining the civil service wouldn't necessarily have made my life much easier. You need to regather yourself, Mom. I'm worried about you."

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MU HANZHANG REMAINED SILENT during their return trip, clutching a palm-sized coin purse hidden in his sleeve. Given to him by Concubine Qiu, it contained one hundred thousand taels of silver in a banknote. Her words rang in his ears.

"The Qiu clan sends me the dividends from my share in the family business every year, and I've saved most of it—it's not like I have much use for money inside the estate. It's all yours. The imperial family is full of hidden perils, and even if that man favors you now, it's unlikely he'll remain true to you for a whole lifetime. Knowing that you have this money on hand makes me feel better."

"Junqing?" The ignored Jing Shao stared at him through slightly tipsy eyes filled with discontent. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Hmm?" Mu Hanzhang turned to him, a hint of confusion in his beautiful dark eyes, but it cleared up almost instantly. "This one has been disrespectful, Your Highness. Please forgive me."

Jing Shao sighed. "It's nothing. I'm going to sleep for a bit."

Just now, he had said that he hadn't agreed to Marquis Beiwei's request to get involved with the salt trade and had instead directed him toward another business

opportunity. Repeating himself would've been pointless; it would have seemed as though he was showing off on purpose. And so, he closed his eyes and said no more.

Seeing him sulk in the corner, trying to sleep, Mu Hanzhang felt a little guilty. He reached out and gently nudged Jing Shao's back. "Your Highness…lean on this one if you wish to sleep. There's no pillow in the carriage." It was a rocky ride. If he fell asleep, he might bump his head.

Jing Shao didn't react at all and kept his back to him.

Is he really angry? Mu Hanzhang leaned closer. "Your Highness?" Receiving no reaction, he leaned in a little more.

Suddenly, the whole cabin jolted, a stone under the carriage's wheels rocking the vehicle. As Mu Hanzhang had been sitting on his knees, he tumbled backward, losing his balance. Yet, the man who had just been sulking immediately spun around, holding him securely in the carriage with one large hand cushioning the back of his head.

Startled by this turn of events, Mu Hanzhang froze, his mind going blank.

"Your Highness, I'm so sorry! Please forgive me," begged the coachman in a panic.

"It's all right," Jing Shao replied, but he didn't get up yet. Instead, he relaxed his body and rested his head on Mu Hanzhang's chest.

"Your…Your Highness…" Having just now realized how suggestive their position was, Mu Hanzhang turned red in the face and tried to push away the big fuzzy head on his chest.

"You're not allowed to call me 'Your Highness' in private," Jing Shao said sullenly. "Look, what's the difference between what you just said and what the coachman said?"

"One cannot neglect etiquette," Mu Hanzhang sighed.

"I don't care." Jing Shao was likely a bit drunk, and he was becoming as unreasonable as a child. "Call me Shao."

"Your Highness…"

"Call me Shao!" Jing Shao propped up his torso and stared intently at the man beneath him, his dazzlingly bright eyes full of childlike expectation.

Even if that man favors you now, it's unlikely he'll remain true to you for a whole lifetime. His husband seemed to have the emotional range of a child, but even if his feelings toward him were only the affection of a child for a toy, for now at least, Mu Hanzhang could feel that Jing Shao was fond of him.

"Shao…"

Hearing this, Jing Shao was finally satisfied. Still sprawled over the man in his arms, he closed his eyes and began to nap. What happened today had reminded him that he must wash his hands of the salt permit trade as soon as possible. At the very least, he needed to move it underground immediately. As he mulled this over, he couldn't help but tighten his embrace about Mu Hanzhang. As he'd thought, holding onto this man brought him peace of mind.

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As soon as they got back to the estate, Jing Shao climbed into bed and fell asleep. Even though his elevated status meant no individual would have dared to make him drink too much, as a son-in-law at a homecoming banquet, he had had to drink a cup with each of the many elders and brothers of the Mu clan. Even he'd found it a bit overwhelming.

"Greetings, Your Highness. My name is Yun Zhu." A teenage boy of around thirteen or fourteen knelt and kowtowed to Mu Hanzhang. Duofu stood nearby and smilingly informed him that this was the pageboy he had chosen for him, along with two bodyguards. As he spoke, two men in bodyguard uniforms also stepped forward to bow.

"Yun Zhu is the nephew of Master Yun—the outer court steward. He's usually pretty quick on his feet. Your Highness can start with him, and if he does not meet your expectations, I can find you a replacement." With that simple introduction, Duofu withdrew with the two bodyguards.

Worn out from the day's events, Mu Hanzhang was leaning back against the soft bolster pillow on the daybed. Yun Zhu immediately moved the teacups to the side table by the daybed and thoughtfully nudged the incense burner out of the way.

Mu Hanzhang smiled and beckoned Yun Zhu closer. "How old are you?"

"To answer Your Highness, I'm thirteen this year by the spring reckoning." Though he was young, Yun Zhu was not at all timid; his prepubescent voice was crisp and clear, while his lively large eyes were particularly endearing.

"When did you become a part of the estate? Can you read?" Mu Hanzhang found the child adorable, so as he took off his own shoes, he made some room on the footrest by the daybed, inviting Yun Zhu to sit.

"I've been here with my uncle since I was eight, so I know a bit about everything that goes on here," said Yun Zhu, and he boldly folded himself onto the footrest with his legs crossed beneath him.

"I've studied with my uncle since I became a part of the estate. I'm not that smart, and I'm a slow reader, but I can recognize enough common words to be useful. I was the one who organized the books in the small study today. If there's any book you can't find, Your Highness, just ask me. I'll find it for sure."

Mu Hanzhang mulled this over. If Yun Zhu had joined the household at eight, that meant he'd basically been around since Jing Shao left the palace to build his estate as a prince; this pageboy was indeed useful.

Though, just a moment, what was that? "My books are in the small study?"

"Yes, His Highness left instructions before leaving this morning. Chief Steward Duofu and I have been busy with it all day," said Yun Zhu, smiling. By now, the whole estate knew that His Highness absolutely doted on his new wife. Naturally, having such a favored master brought Yun Zhu prestige as well—possibly even surpassing that of his elder cousin, who worked for Prince Cheng.

Although Yun Zhu called it a small study, Mu Hanzhang found it actually wasn't small at all; it managed to accommodate the two large boxes of books he brought from the Beiwei Estate, plus an additional shelf with newly added books. A sandalwood desk, musical instruments, game boards, and calligraphy and painting

supplies were all laid out. Many items were clearly newly bought for him, in subtle and understated hues that he favored.

Lingering in this elegant and luxurious study, Mu Hanzhang couldn't quite describe what he felt. Aside from his mother, no one had ever been so attentive in their care for him.

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IN THE BEDROOM, Jing Shao slept so soundly that he missed dinnertime. Mu Hanzhang sent for a bowl of millet porridge from the kitchen, along with two side dishes, and had them delivered to the inner chamber. The room was dark, and a faint snoring came from the direction of the bed. Once he dismissed the servants, Mu Hanzhang lit two lamps and slowly rolled up the bed veil.

Gradually, the light coaxed Jing Shao from sleep, and he grunted before finally opening his eyes.

"Get up and eat something. It's gotten a bit late, so this one had the kitchen make some millet porridge. To avoid indigestion, it's best not to have a large meal," Mu Hanzhang said gently, draping an outer garment over Jing Shao after he sat up in bed.

Jing Shao blinked in confusion and picked up the porridge bowl, still feeling somewhat dazed. When had Junqing suddenly become so gentle and unguarded?

"The study…is very beautiful… Thank you." Mu Hanzhang lowered his eyes, speaking haltingly. Polite phrases such as "Thank you, Your Highness" were easy for him, but the casualness of these scant few words felt incredibly weird in his mouth.

"Junqing?" Jing Shao looked at him with surprise and delight, and in a moment of excitement, grabbed the hand he had hidden in his sleeve. "You finally stopped calling me Your Highness."

"Your…Your Highness…" Mu Hanzhang's hand shook, Jing Shao's sudden action driving thought from his mind.

"Ahem." Realizing that he'd embarrassed himself again, Jing Shao let go of the other man's hand and picked up his chopsticks. "I only get a simple thank you? I definitely haven't heard about anyone else getting their wife a new study before."

Mu Hanzhang's heart, already tense, sank abruptly. He looked up at Jing Shao.

Noting the sudden change, Jing Shao realized that his habitually cold tone had frightened him. He quickly amended, "This Prince wants a sincere token of thanks." As he said this, he pointed to his own cheek.

"Your…Your Highness…" Mu Hanzhang was at a complete loss for how to respond.

Jing Shao leaned in, and in his alluring voice, right by his ear, he said, "Or you can let me give you a kiss. That's fair too."

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AFTER ENJOYING HIS EXQUISITE late-night snack, Jing Shao sauntered happily over to the small study, where he excavated his consort-in-hiding. Earlier, before Jing Shao had managed to extract his token of gratitude, the man had gotten up and fled.

Watching his wife sitting solemnly behind the desk reading the *Official Law of Great Chen* with his earlobes flushed red as carnelian, Jing Shao was forced to hold his fist against his lips to stifle a laugh.

He strolled over to Mu Hanzhang and said, “It’s getting late. Shouldn’t Your Highness be returning to your room?”

Chapter 10:
Peach Blossom Wine

"THIS ONE…is not yet tired." The words "returning to your room" only made Mu Hanzhang's ears even redder.

Jing Shao thought he looked adorable. He reached out to close the boring law book and pulled him up. Mu Hanzhang staggered to his feet. "It just so happens that I'm not tired either. Come on, let me take you somewhere."

"Your Highness…" Jing Shao looked so eager that Mu Hanzhang felt obliged to follow him outside while comfortingly telling himself that perhaps Jing Shao would forget all about that token of gratitude before long.

Leaving the study, they wandered through many hallways before somehow winding up in the ornamental gardens.

"Wait here for me." The two of them stopped at the rockery, and Jing Shao ducked into a small cave. In no time at all, he returned with a small lidded basket.

"What's this?" Mu Hanzhang asked with faint curiosity. To think something was actually hidden in the estate's gardens; Jing Shao was acting like a child hiding toys.

Jing Shao chuckled without answering and pulled him up onto the highest earth mound in the ornamental garden, where a small, elegant octagonal pavilion had been built.

"Hold this." Jing Shao handed the basket to the man beside him. Once he'd taken it, he reached out and wrapped Mu Hanzhang in his arms.

"Your Highness!" Mu Hanzhang cried out in surprise, but before he could do anything, he'd already been deposited on top of the pavilion.

"This is the highest point in the whole estate," Jing Shao said, smiling as he sat down among the roof tiles. He patted the space next to him. "Come sit."

All Mu Hanzhang could do was slowly sit down next to him. The roof of the pavilion was slanted, and he felt as if he could slide off at any moment.

Jing Shao found his cautious behavior rather amusing, so he reached out and wrapped an arm around his waist. "You won't fall with me here."

Mu Hanzhang was drawn in by that strong arm until he was leaning against Jing Shao. He shifted to try and sit up straight, but when the hand on his waist showed no intention of letting him go, he could only let him be. They had taken a vow of marriage, after all, and no one was around, so there was no need to observe strict etiquette. Even if Jing Shao wanted to take things further, he wasn't allowed to resist.

Sensing no objection from the man beside him, Jing Shao happily kept his arm around Mu Hanzhang. "The Stargaze Pavilion is my favorite spot in the entire estate. On clear nights, you can see a sky full of stars."

Mu Hanzhang's gaze turned upward in the direction he pointed, and he found the sky indeed filled from edge to edge with stars. Without any buildings or their eaves to obstruct the view, the sky stretched from horizon to horizon as if they sat in a

shining river.

A helpless smile tugged at his lips. “It’s so beautiful. I’ve never seen such a complete starry sky.”

He was a common-born son and could not run wild like Mu Lingbao; growing up in the Marquis’s estate, he had to observe etiquette everywhere he went. If he’d put so much as a toe out of line, let alone something like climbing onto the roof, someone would have been there to notice. Getting caught would have garnered a good beating from his father.

“You never climbed a tree when you were a kid?” Jing Shao asked, somewhat surprised.

Boys were always mischievous when they were young, weren’t they? He shared that when he was little, he’d often climbed the trees in the Imperial Gardens to look in birds’ nests and gone stargazing in the treetops at night. Whenever the palace maids or the eunuchs had caught him, he’d gotten a spanking from his mother. But Mother could never bring herself to beat him too badly, so he’d be back running around again the next day, ready to cause more havoc.

Upon hearing Jing Shao’s many “glorious exploits” as a child, Mu Hanzhang laughed aloud. He’d never expected such a dignified prince to have been an unruly child. He honestly couldn’t help but feel envious of him. No one had been there to guide him when he was young; his mother wasn’t highly educated, so all she could teach him was how to use an abacus and balance books. When his father discovered this, he had thrown a fit, saying that his mother was spoiling him. He’d sent him off to the clan school early and forbade his mother from speaking to him more than was strictly necessary.

Jing Shao couldn’t help but tease him. “Starting school so early, it’s no wonder that you already act like an old man at your age.”

Mu Hanzhang shot him a glare. “Your Highness isn’t even as old as this one.”

“Uh…” Jing Shao had let that slip by accident—he had lived into his thirties in his previous life, so naturally he thought of the present Junqing as quite young. Rubbing his nose awkwardly, he picked up the basket nearby to change the subject. “This is my treasured peach blossom wine; I only get a little jar once a year. I want you to try some.”

Inside the basket was a small white porcelain bottle with two matching cups. Jing Shao uncorked the bottle and poured it into each cup; inside the translucent cups, the clear alcohol was tinted faintly pink.

Mu Hanzhang took a cup, but he stopped Jing Shao’s hand as it reached for the wine. “Your Highness, you drank so much at High Noon. You shouldn’t drink anymore.”

“Ha ha, I sobered up from the tiny amount I drank at noon long ago; I’ve had all kinds of strong liquor living in an army camp,” said Jing Shao, dismissing his concerns. “This stuff is really weak. Even drinking ten jugs won’t get me drunk.”

Hearing this, Mu Hanzhang raised the cup to his lips and tried a small sip. It tasted sweet, with a faint floral fragrance, and as he swallowed, the delicate flavor of peach blossoms filled his mouth. He couldn’t help but finish the entire cup.

Noticing that he liked it, Jing Shao handed him the bottle. After all, one of his arms was still wrapped around Mu Hanzhang’s waist, making it difficult for him to

pour.

"The Marquis Beiwei peerage has a long lineage of valiant generals—why didn't your dad teach you martial arts?"

Jing Shao had always wondered about this. Whether one was born legitimate or common, everyone had to learn some martial arts in the Beiwei Estate, but Junqing did not know any at all.

The radiance in Mu Hanzhang's eyes dimmed. Silently, he poured himself another cup. "When I was little, my meridians were damaged by hypothermia, and the doctor said that I couldn't practice martial arts anymore."

"What?" Jing Shao looked at him, shocked. "How did you get hypothermia?" As a direct descendant of Marquis Beiwei, even if he was of lower status than the heir, surely it wasn't to the point where anyone would abuse him?

"I fell into the pond during the coldest week of winter…" Mu Hanzhang finished his second cup of wine and poured himself another, a hint of self-mockery playing at the corner of his lips.

Being unable to practice martial arts was a source of constant anguish for him. When he'd been very small, his father had said that he had a wonderful constitution for it, and had wanted to teach him their hereditary spear technique. But once the doctor informed them that he couldn't practice martial arts anymore, his father had rarely showed interest in anything he did, until he'd seen him playing with an abacus when he was four, and in a fit of anger, smashed his abacus on the ground and sent him off to clan school.

Jing Shao's brows drew together as he watched him down cup after cup. He reached out and snatched his cup away. "This peach blossom wine needs to be savored; how can you drink it like this?"

"I apologize for making a fool of myself, Your Highness." Mu Hanzhang forced a smile and put the cup back in its basket. "It's getting late—" His words cut into a soft grunt as he was pulled bodily into Jing Shao's arms.

"Who pushed you?" In Jing Shao's eyes, there was a rare somber darkness as though a storm was brewing. Any normal wealthy family would have built stone platforms along the edges of their ponds, and besides, if the little young master ran off to play by the pond, Jing Shao found it hard to believe that his servants wouldn't have been close by. There was no way he'd believe anyone would have just watched as Junqing fell into a pond in midwinter!

"I fell on my own." Mu Hanzhang lowered his eyes, unwilling to say more. An image of that lotus pond surfaced before his eyes. He had been too young to remember much in great detail now, only that his grandmother had made him a new snow-white cloak of rabbit fur, the pastry-crumb-encrusted hands of a chubby boy two heads taller than he was, and then the ice-cold pond water and the gray sky of a snowy day above him.

Jing Shao stared at the man in his arms and felt his heart clench painfully. Slowly, he lowered his head and pressed a soft kiss over one of Mu Hanzhang's closed eyelids. When Mu Hanzhang opened his eyes in surprise, Jing Shao still didn't stop; he kissed the space between his brows, the center of his forehead, his cheeks, as if this way, he could rescue him from that frozen nightmare.

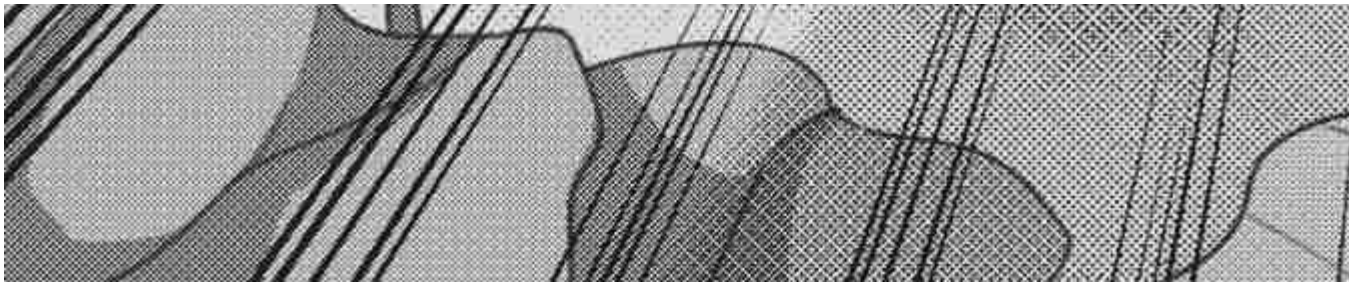
Mu Hanzhang was holding himself tense and still, but when Jing Shao's kiss landed on the corner of his lips, he finally couldn't help saying something. "Your

Highness…”

Jing Shao pulled himself away. He looked into Mu Hanzhang’s beautiful eyes, with a whole sky’s worth of stars captured within, and he couldn’t resist clutching him to his chest. “You will have your revenge!”

His wife was so wonderful and so precious that he was afraid to hold him too close lest he should crush him, and to think someone had actually dared hurt him this way! Just imagine, a tiny little Junqing getting pushed into the water in midwinter—how frightening it must have been! How cold! How painful!

Mu Hanzhang felt the strength of the arms tightly embracing him, and slowly, he reached out to return the embrace, allowing himself to be vulnerable for just a moment, to linger in his sorrow for just a moment, to quietly…indulge in this warmth for just a moment longer…



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THE NEXT DAY, Jing Shao changed into casual attire after breakfast. “I’ll be out all day, and I probably won’t be back for lunch.”

“Mm-hmm.” Helping him hang the jade pendant from his belt, Mu Hanzhang didn’t ask where he was going. As they had just married, His Majesty had exempted Prince Cheng from morning court for twenty-seven days, so his going out at this hour was certainly not to attend it. But it was not Mu Hanzhang’s place to inquire about these things.

“I’ll be back before dinner. If you feel bored, go ahead and take the two bodyguards and go for a stroll.” Jing Shao couldn’t help saying a bit more when Mu Hanzhang didn’t ask him where he was going. “I’ve heard there’s a garden in the south end of the city where gentlemen wives often gather. Maybe you can go spend some time with them.”

Jing Shao’s expression clearly said, *“If you don’t seriously answer me, I’ll just keep talking,”* so Mu Hanzhang couldn’t help but smile, and he finally responded at length, “Is that so? This is certainly the first time this one had ever heard of it.”

Satisfied, Jing Shao left the house. Upon reaching the outer court, he sent for his steward, Master Yun. “Go find out why the common-born son of Marquis Beiwei fell into the pond many years ago.”

“Certainly, I will take care of it right away,” said Master Yun, a man with a long beard and a look of ethereal grace. “Your Highness, are you taking a carriage or are you riding today?”

“I’m riding.” Jing Shao’s pageboy Yun Song led over a black steed, and the prince stroked the horse’s shiny, sleek fur. “Shadow, it’s been a long time.”

The black horse neighed and nuzzled Jing Shao affectionately. Shadow was a wild horse he had tamed on the grasslands. Although the stallion had a fiery temperament and wasn’t a purebred, he outshone all the other generals’ renowned steeds due to his high intelligence and ability to avoid obstacles without being directed. If he’d had Shadow with him at the end of his former life, he and Junqing wouldn’t have been forced to jump off a cliff.

But if he’d avoided that end, he never would have had this chance to start from the beginning. As the saying went, “Fortune follows calamity, but calamity follows fortune.” Who could say for certain, then, whether something was one or the other?

“Lord Li came by yesterday and left when he heard Your Highness wasn’t in. He said it wasn’t anything important,” Master Yun said, reporting on the previous day’s events.

“Li Yanqing?”

His steward nodded, and Jing Shao frowned. This was the same Li Yanqing in the last entry of his blue ledger, stashed away in the hidden compartment. “If he comes again, have him wait at the Immortal Feast the following day at High Noon.”

“Certainly,” Master Yun replied, watching Jing Shao ride out the door.

Chapter 11:
Country Villa

THE BLACK STALLION galloped swiftly through the streets with a handsome prince on his back, causing the vendors on the street to move casually out of his way, unfazed by the common sight.

"Did you see that? If you don't stop throwing a fit, I'll let Prince Cheng take you away." A woman selling vegetables dropped her basket and gestured at the speeding figure. She was scolding her child about their unrelenting wailing.

Having just pulled on the reins to slow down, Jing Shao happened to overhear this exchange. He couldn't help frowning. *Prince Cheng is vicious on the battlefield; he's executed one hundred thousand prisoners of war. Just his name could cure a child of night tantrums.* He'd been accused of this in the past.

But killing a hundred thousand prisoners? Preposterous. It had been a campaign against the Xiongnu, and he'd only brought fifty thousand men himself. The entire Xiongnu army wasn't even close to one hundred thousand men. In actuality, he'd had the Xiongnu general and his elite troops of two thousand surrounded and had tried to negotiate their surrender. But they'd refused to yield, preferring to die rather than submit. Therefore, he'd executed them row by row from the outside in, until finally, the general attempted to break through but was slain by his hand. Fewer than five hundred were captured alive by the end, and each had harbored deep hatred toward the Chen army. Sparing them would only have invited future disaster.

Clearly, the rumors had already begun to circulate.

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THE SKY WAS CLEAR of clouds, and sunlight streamed in through the open window, warming the wide sandalwood desk. Sitting before it, Mu Hanzhang held a ledger, meticulously inventorying his dowry.

The Beiwei Estate was prosperous and had many diverse businesses, but it also had many mouths to feed, so the property allocated to him was worth less than thirty thousand taels in total. His mother had reviewed the public ledger and found no fault with it. Although thirty thousand taels wasn't exactly short of what he was owed, he hadn't received a copper more either. Moreover, he could not be given the ancestral homes and fields, and after the Spring Festival, essentially none of the Beiwei Estate's assets were liquid. He had been allotted tangible assets like country villas and farmland, and what little cash the estate had on hand for his dowry.

As far as he could recall, the land in the eastern outskirts was a stretch of overgrown woodland, filled with black locust trees and scattered in irregularly shaped rocks. Nothing could be grown on it, so it was unsuitable for a country garden, making it basically useless. And this pointless piece of property took up more than half of his "inheritance." Mu Hanzhang sneered. *Lady Du certainly doesn't seem*

afraid of gossip!

However, this meant that he basically had no cash on hand. The one hundred thousand taels given by his mother had come in a single banknote, and he didn't intend to use that money unless it became absolutely necessary.

"Your Highness, Madam Song is here in the east wing," Yun Zhu said in a panic after bolting into the study.

"What is she doing here?" Mu Hanzhang frowned, putting the ledger away in the cabinet. Hadn't she already come by to pay her respects after breakfast?

"It has to be about household management. If she says it's going to take her a few months to hand over the ledger, whatever you do, don't say yes to her." Yun Zhu's nose wrinkled, his tone somewhat displeased.

Mu Hanzhang heard him but didn't say anything. He merely asked him to bring Lady Song to the small study.

Song Lingxin approached with a charming smile. "This one hopes that Your Highness will not take offense to this unannounced visit."

Mu Hanzhang had no patience to engage with her, and after exchanging a few pleasantries, he asked her what her purpose was.

"According to the rules, as Your Highness is a part of the household now, all household affairs must be handed over to you. But the estate has always issued monthly allowances on the first day of each month, and a lot has happened this month, so handing it over right now might cause problems. So, this one is here to ask Your Highness for guidance," said Song Lingxin with a smile.

Mu Hanzhang lowered his gaze, his hand fiddling with the white jade paperweight from his desk, absently stroking its smooth edges with his thumb—a mannerism he had whenever he was deep in thought. "If that's the case, you may continue to manage things for the next few days. As for overseeing household management, we can discuss it again tonight when His Highness returns."

When she realized that Mu Hanzhang wasn't falling for her trick, Song Lingxin went pale, but she recovered quickly. "Certainly. Inevitably, what this one says doesn't count. After all, it entirely depends on what His Highness thinks. And one more thing…" As she said this, she placed a booklet on the desk.

"What is this?" Mu Hanzhang glanced at it; there was nothing on the cover but a drawing of a peony.

"This is the schedule of bedchamber duties," said Song Lingxin. She found talking about something like this with a man a bit embarrassing, but it had to be said. "This one has already discussed it with the others, and it's all written down here. Please take a look so that Chief Steward Duofu can make arrangements in advance."

This topic made Mu Hanzhang feel a little bit uncomfortable as well. Indicating that he understood, he then dismissed her with a wave, letting her know she could return to the west wing.

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JING SHAO FINALLY ARRIVED at the outskirts of the capital, at the Prince Cheng Country Villa.

This mountain estate had been bestowed on him by His Majesty. Built against a rather tall earthen mountain with lush greenery and bubbling brooks, this country villa was his summer retreat.

"Greetings, Your Highness!" When he entered the courtyard, a big man in a green outfit with his hair tied back was the first to step forward to pay his respects.

Jing Shao handed the reins of his horse to an approaching servant, then asked the man in green, "Where is Ren Feng?"

"The captain is at the training grounds. I can fetch him."

"No need. You can come with This Prince to see what he's up to." With his hands clasped behind him, Jing Shao sauntered through the wooden corridor toward the western side of the villa.

The villa took up far more land than the Prince Cheng Estate inside the city. The entire western side had been transformed into a training ground, with a three-foot-high wooden platform in the center equipped with weapon racks displaying all eighteen types of weapons. Currently, two figures in gray Imperial Guard uniforms were locked in a fierce battle on the platform.

One wielded a saber, the other a spear, and the two exchanged blows back and forth. Beneath the platform, a group of people in the same uniform cheered and shouted whenever the performance got exciting. It was a rather lively scene.

When Jing Shao arrived, he was just in time to watch as a rather impressive reverse spear thrust pelted the saber-wielding fighter off the platform. "Wonderful!"

His appraisal alerted the crowd to their master's arrival, and they got on their knees to bow. "Your Highness!"

A tall man in black stepped out from the crowd and dropped to one knee in front of Jing Shao. "I was not aware that Your Highness was coming and failed to welcome you at the gates. Please forgive me, Your Highness."

"You rascal, what's all this about?!" Jing Shao made everyone stand and smacked the man in black upside the head. This was the captain that Jing Shao had asked after. Prince Cheng's Imperial Guard, two hundred strong, were housed in this villa, and Ren Feng was his Imperial Guard Captain.

Ren Feng got to his feet, chuckling to himself. The scar that stretched from his brow bone to the corner of his left eye gave off a rather bloodthirsty aura, but when his round face brightened with a smile, he appeared earnest and kind. "Last time, Master Yun said I was too vulgar and had no knowledge of manners, so I thought I'd try to rustle up some of that etiquette stuff from them high-class generals."

Jing Shao raised an eyebrow. "You? Really?"

Smacking his head a second time, Jing Shao grabbed his collar and dragged him onto the platform. "Never mind that pointless nonsense. Come, help This Prince loosen up his muscles."

Ren Feng immediately looked pained. "Your Highness, I just fought for four hours."

“Enough chatter!” Jing Shao ignored him, tossed him a random weapon, then charged in with his saber drawn.

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As Mu Hanzhang had predicted, Jing Shao didn’t return to the estate at High Noon. Mu Hanzhang ate lunch on his own before eagerly running back to the small study, tossing the peony-covered booklet to the side. He hadn’t yet had the chance to carefully peruse the one shelf of books that wasn’t from his personal collection. Jing Shao had told him last night that, from now on, this small study belonged to him, and he could read any book he wanted.

Aside from some brand-new travelogues and essays he’d seen yesterday, it looked like some of them had been read before. Mu Hanzhang speculated that they might be books Jing Shao used to store in this room before it’d become a study. Perhaps because they weren’t read often, they hadn’t been moved to the study in Zephyr Pavilion. He pulled out a stack of blue hardcovers, set them on the table, then pulled one volume out to read.

To his surprise, it was actually a book on military strategy! But as he thought on it, he realized it would have been strange if there were books of poetry and lyrics in Jing Shao’s study.

As he slowly flipped it open, Mu Hanzhang felt his eyes widen. Between the book’s lines of neat black print, the white space was densely filled with annotations in vermilion ink.

Chapter 12:
Bedchamber Duties

THE NOTES WERE SOMEWHAT CHILDLIKE, and the book itself looked fairly old. Mu Hanzhang flipped through the entire series and discovered that Jing Shao had been diligent from a very young age. No wonder he'd been able to defeat the Xiongnu in his teens and had surpassed his two older brothers by receiving the imperial prince title before them.

"Your Highness, I just spoke with Miss Zhixi." Yun Zhu bounced into the room, grinning all the way to the desk.

"What did you talk about?" Mu Hanzhang smiled at him, putting the book back on the shelf.

"Madam Song was the one who used to set the schedule for the bedchamber duties. Every month, Madam Song got twenty days, and the other two concubines only got four days each." Yun Zhu couldn't help but chuckle to himself when he recalled the look on Zhixi's face. "And those eight days were when Madam Song had her period."

Mu Hanzhang cast a glance at the mischievously grinning pageboy and wearily shook his head. *Asking an unmarried girl like Zhixi about these things, really…*

"But His Highness is constantly away at war, and even when he's in the estate, he rarely sleeps in the west wing anyway," Yun Zhu quickly added, trying to put his master at ease.

"Sharp little rascal. You sure know a lot." Mu Hanzhang tapped Yun Zhu on the head.

"Of course I do. My uncle says that he can arrange a wife for me in two years." Yun Zhu nodded proudly and picked up the booklet. "Since Your Highness doesn't have to worry about periods, why not just schedule His Highness in the east wing for twenty-five days each month? That leaves one day each for the three of them."

"How could that possibly be acceptable?" It made Mu Hanzhang laugh.

If he set things up like that, he feared he'd swiftly gain a reputation for being a possessive and unprincipled wife. However, whenever he thought about how painful his wedding night had been, he still felt a lingering fear. If he had to do that every night for nearly an entire month, it would simply be too unbearable.

Frowning, he opened the peony booklet and saw the old records still there, just as Yun Zhu had described them. A sheet of paper written by Madam Song was tucked inside the booklet—her basic suggestion was to divide the month from the fifteenth, with His Highness staying in the east wing for the first half, in the west with Madam Song for nine days, and then with the other concubines for three days each.

"And what primary wife doesn't take up at least eighteen days? Madam Song sure is calculating." Yun Zhu couldn't help but pout.

While Madam Song had been in charge of the household for the past two years, Yun Zhu's monthly allowance had never increased, and the year-end bonus red envelope had contained less and less money each year. On the other hand, the personal maids she had brought as her dowry monopolized all the cushy jobs. The

servants in the estate had long since been fed up with her.

Mu Hanzhang raised an eyebrow. He didn't find it a bad arrangement for him, personally. And so, he picked up a brush, and with his elegant and powerful handwriting, copied Madam Song's suggestions into the peony booklet.

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IT WAS ALREADY DARK by the time Jing Shao returned. He bathed, washing off the sweat and dirt of the day, then changed into a set of comfortable loose robes.

After dinner, Master Yun came to Jing Shao to give him a report. "Your Highness, Lord Li came by again today, and I responded as you instructed."

"Understood." Jing Shao took care of several more items before telling Master Yun he could withdraw for the day. Then, he stretched and immediately tried to lie down on the bed.

Mu Hanzhang stepped forward and stopped him. "Your Highness, you just had dinner. You'll have indigestion."

"Huh? But I'm tired." Jing Shao didn't want to stay up. He'd been fighting all day, and his body was still sore.

Noticing the prince's flat expression, belied by his eyes, which were full of reluctance like a child forced to wake up early, Mu Hanzhang resisted the urge to pat his head and pulled him down to sit on the daybed. "Just lean back here and let the food digest a bit."

Jing Shao blinked. Was Junqing concerned about him? All his reluctance vanished in a puff of smoke. Grabbing his consort, he leaned back on the daybed. "As long as we don't have to take a walk."

Mu Hanzhang laughed in spite of himself and shifted up a little bit. A certain someone took immediate advantage of the situation and decided to sprawl right over his lap. "Junqing, can you rub my shoulders for me? They're really sore."

"This one is not a handmaiden and is not skilled in such things." Insisting this, Mu Hanzhang placed his hands over Jing Shao's shoulders anyway.

When his hand pressed on a certain spot, Jing Shao suddenly inhaled sharply.

"Does it hurt?" Mu Hanzhang asked, startled. He hadn't even put any force behind it, so how had he managed to hurt him?

"Yeah, it might be bruised." Jing Shao seemed not to care.

"Did Your Highness practice martial arts today?" Mu Hanzhang frowned and pulled down Jing Shao's collar a little, finding a huge bruise. Resigned to the task, he reached for the liniment and began rubbing it in to promote blood flow.

As his warm and slender fingers, dipped in cool liniment, massaged Jing Shao's skin, he felt like he had to hold his breath; the hand kneaded and rubbed over his bruising, and he could picture the beautiful shape of that hand, without a single callus.

Jing Shao couldn't resist grabbing Mu Hanzhang's other hand, holding it up to his face. Under the lamplight, his slender, beautiful hand seemed utterly flawless.

Through supple skin, translucent like jade, he could see several faint lines of bluish veins, and his fingers were as slender as spring scallions, his fingernails trimmed neat and filed smooth. He squeezed Mu Hanzhang's hand in his, an undeniable fondness for it forming inside him, and unable to resist any longer, pulled the hand to his lips and bit it gently.

"Your Highness!" Shocked, Mu Hanzhang snatched his hand back.

"Junqing, your hands are so beautiful." Jing Shao turned over and looked up at him innocently.

At a loss, Mu Hanzhang pulled Jing Shao's collar back into place. "Lady Song came by today to discuss the overseeing of household management. It's already the middle of the Third Month, and there is a lot to attend to in the estate. So, since she wants to keep managing things, this one thought: Why not let her take care of things a little while longer?"

Jing Shao's brows furrowed at the sound of this, and he checked Mu Hanzhang's expression, yet Mu Hanzhang looked as gentle and kind as ever, and he was unable to glean anything from his face. The only reason Lady Song had said this was because she was unwilling to relinquish power—but, if she was allowed to continue to manage the household affairs, Junqing's authority within the estate would be greatly diminished. He refused to believe that someone as smart as Junqing was not aware of this fact. He could only sigh.

"You're the princely consort, therefore you should be the one to do these things. If you find it annoying, then let Duofu do it. I will ask Song Lingxin to hand over the ledger to you tomorrow."

Jing Shao had already said so much in the past two days, yet Junqing still felt unsure of him; it made Jing Shao a little bit weary. Rumors of his brutality had already begun to circulate in the capital, and just as before, no one in this world was willing to believe him. Silently, he rose, and without another glance at the man on the daybed, Jing Shao removed his outer robes and climbed into bed.

"Your Highness…" Looking at Jing Shao's back, Mu Hanzhang felt a pang in his heart as he realized that his overly clever phrasing had hurt him.

His mouth tightened, and he followed him to the bed, putting a hand on the arm of the man who was still facing away from him. "Your Highness, that was not what this one meant. Before she hands over the current ledger, she should provide ledgers from previous years so that this one can study them. It would be best if this month's ledger is transferred over next month. Otherwise, because this one is not yet familiar with the books, this one really might make mistakes."

Jing Shao faced the wall, sullen and quiet.

Mu Hanzhang nudged Jing Shao's arm, then jiggled it.

He still wasn't talking…?

Mu Hanzhang leaned over to steal a glance at Jing Shao's face. His eyes were closed. Mu Hanzhang called out softly, "Shao? Are you listening to me?"

"No." Jing Shao tried to turn a little more toward the bed, but with someone sprawled over him, the weight just flattened him on his front, so he decided to simply bury his face into the pillow and leave it there.

The man on top of him only managed to partially stifle his laugh. "Then let me say it again: I'll have them bring me the ledgers from previous years tomorrow, and

by the first day of next month, I'll make her hand over all of the ledgers."

Hearing this, Jing Shao finally felt relieved, and rolling over, he pinned the man who had held him down beneath him instead.

"Your…Your Highness…" Mu Hanzhang had no idea how they'd ended up in such a suggestive position.

Jing Shao's brows furrowed for a moment, then, staring at those faintly colored thin lips, slightly parted, he leaned down to press his own lips against them.

Mu Hanzhang hummed a muffled groan, his eyes going wide, unsure how to react. All he could feel was those soft, warm lips pressing against his own, and although it was as light as a dragonfly's wings skimming water, it felt to him like it lasted a long time.

"That was your punishment. If you keep being so formal with me, I'll fine you for every mistake," Jing Shao said triumphantly, his smile very smug.

Mu Hanzhang was speechless and could only turn his head to look away. But his handsome face had turned beet red with embarrassment.

Seeing him this way, Jing Shao felt his heart stir, and he couldn't resist kissing him again on the cheek, trailing kisses downward until he softly licked the edge of his chin, then turning those kisses into nibbles when he reached the side of his neck.

Mu Hanzhang hummed, and his body trembled, his breathing quickening. "Your Highness…don't… *Ah!*"

Jing Shao had already pulled his collar open, and his kisses had reached Mu Hanzhang's collarbone. At these words, he bit down on that pretty collarbone. "Call me Shao!"

"Mm-hmm…" Mu Hanzhang could tell that the breathing of the man above him was growing increasingly heavy, and he could feel Jing Shao's hardness at the base of his thigh. He tensed immediately. "Shao…don't…"

Noticing fear in his voice, Jing Shao looked up to find that the blushing pink that had tinged his wife's handsome face before had blanched to a stark white. He couldn't help but sigh and turn over to lie on his side.

Mu Hanzhang bit his lip. As a wife, it was certainly wrong to refuse his husband's advances, but the experience of that night had been far too awful. So even though he knew he wasn't supposed to, he stayed silent and didn't speak again, clutching the corner of the quilt.

When the handmaidens noticed the time, they extinguished the lanterns outside, and it darkened inside immediately. The handmaiden on night duty then tiptoed inside to let down the bed veil before quickly withdrawing.

Jing Shao waited for a little while. Only once he'd calmed himself down did he reach out to pull the still tense Mu Hanzhang under the covers.

The man next to Jing Shao whispered softly, "I'm sorry…"

In the dark, the corners of Jing Shao's lips curled upward, and he pulled Mu Hanzhang into his embrace. "Sleep. It's all right."

Chapter 13:
Salt Permit

THE NEXT DAY, Mu Hanzhang blinked awake, still enfolded in Jing Shao's arms. Warm breath was hitting his neck, and a long leg draped over him made one of his feel a bit numb.

He shifted uncomfortably, and slowly, the man holding him came awake. Jing Shao sighed softly. "Junqing…" He mumbled his name in a lazy, nasal tone.

"Mm-hmm, it's time to get up." Mu Hanzhang shifted again, but not only did the prince not loosen his grip, he even hugged him closer.

"There's no need to rush. It's not like we have to go to morning court." Jing Shao buried his face in Mu Hanzhang's chest and nuzzled against him.

"Your Highness, were you not going to meet with Lord Li today?"

Mu Hanzhang had half a mind to remind him that once they finished breakfast, the harem would be here to pay their respects. What would he do if they came only to find the two of them still in bed?

Jing Shao reluctantly dawdled for a while longer before he finally got up. In his previous life, from the time the campaign against the three feudatories began, he'd practically never gotten the chance to relax and sleep like this. And after he'd been thrown into prison, there'd been no way for him to relax at all, with freezing cold bluestone slabs and dirty rushes for a bed. Ever since, he'd felt increasingly obsessed with anything warm and clean.

He watched Mu Hanzhang as he elegantly pulled on an outer robe, the snow-white garments he'd chosen today making him look ethereal. With his head propped up on one elbow, Jing Shao lay on his side and looked on as a shaft of sunlight illuminated a figure like a celestial being exiled from the heavens. He thought in a daze, *This man is probably the warmest and cleanest existence in all the world!*

Since his appointment with Li Yanqing was at High Noon, Jing Shao was in no rush to leave after breakfast. He sat on the daybed to drink tea with his wife.

"Madam Song and the two concubines are here to pay their respects to the princely consort," announced Zhixi.

Mu Hanzhang nodded, inviting Song Lingxin and the two concubines. When they noticed that Jing Shao was here as well, they naturally knelt and bowed to him first.

When Lady Liu Yanji stood up, she took a little longer than the others, as if feeling uncomfortable. Then, her body swayed forward and she fell.

Mu Hanzhang involuntarily reached out to catch her, but to his surprise, Jing Shao reacted even quicker and yanked her upright. *Seriously? If she'd actually fallen she would have ended up in Junqing's lap!*

"Your Highness…" Yanji raised her eyes—bright as rippling autumn waters—up toward Jing Shao. "I am feeling unwell. My apologies for offending you."

Using his already extended arm, Mu Hanzhang picked up the teacup from the table, took a sip from it, and pretended he hadn't noticed at all.

Jing Shao frowned, completely missing the seduction in her beautiful eyes—this stumble of hers had made him remember that in his past life, it was precisely such a fall in the garden that landed her in his arms. Only then had he noticed her extraordinary beauty and rather favored her for a time. But then, when disaster struck, this woman had mysteriously vanished. In hindsight, since she was sent by the first prince Jing Rong, she must have had a hand in gathering some of the eventual evidence against him.

Noticing that His Highness had continued to stare at her, Yanji couldn't help but feel inwardly delighted, though she kept up her delicate and frail act. It made Song Lingxin silently clench her teeth—this scheming vixen!

Lady Li's eyes darted back and forth, then she took a step back to the side and stood there silently.

"Your Highness, about what this one brought up yesterday…" Song Lingxin stepped forward, breaking the somewhat strange mood that had pervaded the room.

"It has already been handed over to Duofu," Mu Hanzhang said, lowering his eyes as he blew on the steam rising from his cup and took a small sip of tea. "I discussed it with His Highness. You will continue to handle this month's affairs, then on the second day of the next month, you will hand over all of the ledgers in your possession to me. That is all."

The smile on Song Lingxin's face froze, and she turned to Jing Shao, whose gaze was directed at Mu Hanzhang as he asked, "Won't that mean you'll start being busy next month?"

"It's a lot of work. If His Highness were to take over as soon as next month, he might be occupied with it for quite a while," Lady Song commented, her eyes lit again with hope from Jing Shao's interruption.

"I'll be busier than I am now, of course, but right now I've nothing to occupy my time," said Mu Hanzhang, ignoring Lady Song.

"Well then, while you're not busy, let me take you out for a few days." Jing Shao's brows drew together for a moment, but due to the concubines' presence, he did not elaborate.

Song Lingxin's smile tightened further, her face taking on an ashen hue as she led the two concubines out of the room. Once outside, she violently twisted the handkerchief in her hand. The concubines exchanged a look, and Lady Li took a step toward her. "I just kept thinking about the flower tea we had in your room the other day, Jiejie."

Song Lingxin shot them a look. She used to find these two women tiresome, but now that a powerful adversary had appeared, she had to begin by getting these two on her side. And so, after a few polite words were exchanged, she invited them to the floral parlor for tea.

"What's a man doing getting involved with harem and household management? Doesn't he feel it a disgrace to his scholarly dignity?!" Inside the floral parlor, Song Lingxin slammed her cup heavily on the table.

"Right now, he has His Highness's favor. You can't compete with him." Yanji's vixen eyes narrowed, her alluring demeanor rather far from her earlier feigned weakness.

“But from what I heard, His Highness hasn’t done anything for the past two days while sleeping in the east wing,” Lady Li said with a smile. “He fell ill the very day after his wedding night, you know, and I heard it was quite serious. And besides, from what I can tell, there is some sort of agreement between him and Prince Cheng.”

At this, Song Lingxin perked up, as Lady Li had a good rapport with the handmaidens, and those in His Highness’s rooms would often pass information to her. “What do you mean by that?”

“I’ve been told that when he was drinking a medicinal decoction the other day, Their Highnesses had a fight, and something about a Writ of Divorce was mentioned.” Lady Li confidently relayed the information she had gathered.

“Are you saying that His Highness intends to find a suitable opportunity to divorce him?” Yanji asked, adding fuel to the fire at the opportune time.

“Hmph, if that’s the case, as soon as he’s in charge of the household, it’ll be easy enough to find reasons to divorce him.” A smile reappeared on Song Lingxin’s face. She must make good use of this month to leave the princely consort a complete financial mess!

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MEANWHILE, His Highness Prince Cheng, the target of his virtuous concubines, was stuck like glue to his consort, watching him paint.

Noticing his intense stare, Mu Hanzhang tried to start a conversation. “Your Highness, did you go hunting yesterday?”

“Not really. I went looking for a fight.” Jing Shao sprawled over the desk, curiously staring at the tip of his brush. “What are you drawing?”

“It’s a birthday celebration painting,” said Mu Hanzhang, his wolf-hair paintbrush smoothly running over the paper as he gave form to a flowing river and drifting clouds. “My father’s birthday is next month.”

Jing Shao remembered that Mu Hanzhang still wasn’t aware of what he’d said at the homecoming banquet and casually brought it up. “Last time we spoke, I steered him away from getting involved with salt permits and told him to trade horses in the northwest instead.”

“Horse trading?” The tip of Mu Hanzhang’s brush paused on the paper, leaving an extra black dot on a southern mountain. He hurriedly added a few more strokes and turned it into moss.

“Mm-hmm.” There were still certain things he couldn’t talk about, so Jing Shao didn’t explain further. Standing up, he picked up his own brush. “A birthday celebration painting doesn’t have to take this much effort. Here, let me draw you one.”

Mu Hanzhang set out a sheet of paper for him, wondering what he would draw. He looked on as Jing Shao gathered all of his concentration and waved his brush around; with a few swishes, a rather ugly turtle leapt onto the paper.

"Um…" The corners of Mu Hanzhang's mouth twitched. "You call this a longevity celebration painting?"

"Bastard turtles live to be a thousand, and the softshells can get to ten thousand. How's that not a longevity celebration painting?" Jing Shao looked rather pleased with himself.

Pfft! Even though it was disrespectful toward Mu Hanzhang's father, he burst out laughing. "Your Highness, if you give that picture to Father, you'll become a laughingstock."

"Then let's gift the one you painted first, and when it's time for the Marquise Beiwei's birthday celebration, we can send mine." Jing Shao lifted up his painting, gave it another look, and said to Yun Zhu who'd been standing nearby, "Go get this mounted."

"Certainly." Yun Zhu rolled up the painting, repressing his own laughter.

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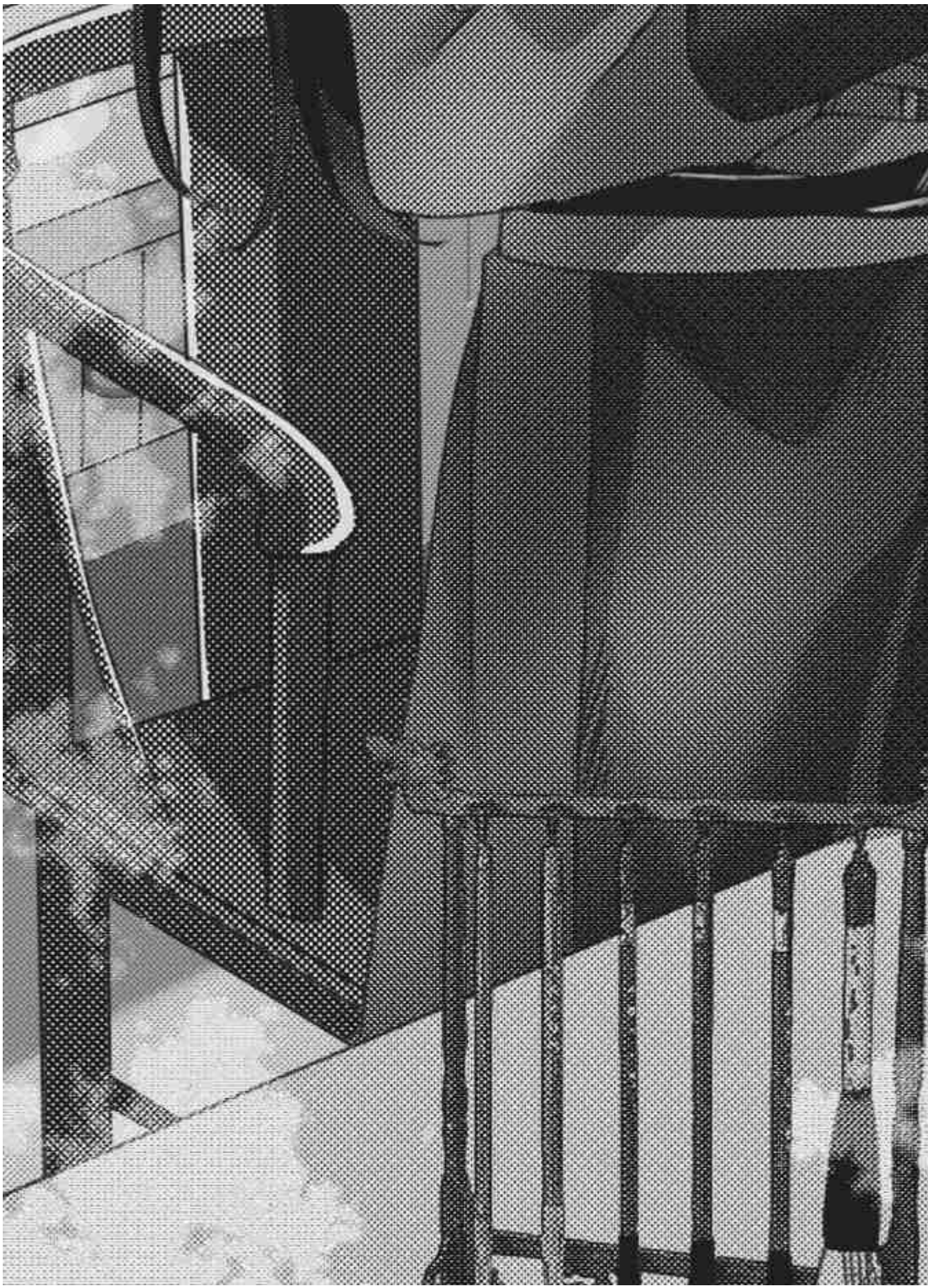
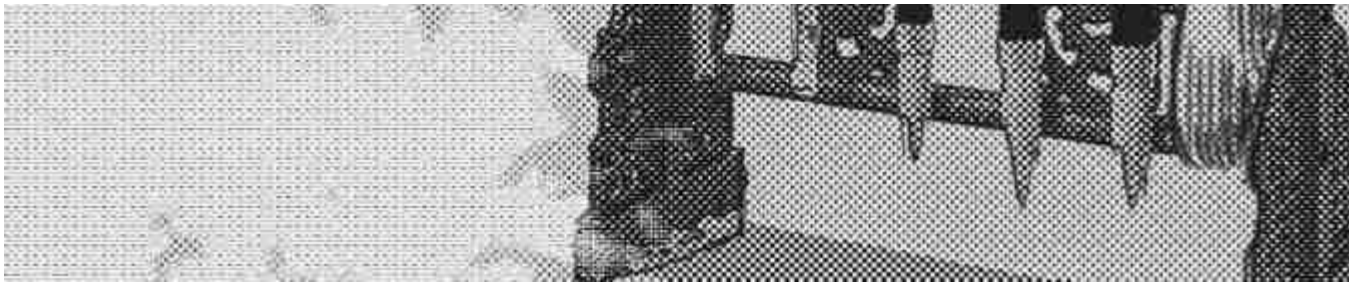
As high noon approached, Jing Shao was still lounging around in the small study and refused to budge. Mu Hanzhang had to urge him to go out and attend to proper business.





“Come on, come with me. I’m only exchanging a few words. In the afternoon, I’ll take you out somewhere in the city outskirts.” Jing Shao was thinking of taking Junqing to the south side of the city to try the snacks there, then off to see if the peach blossoms in his brother’s villa had bloomed. These were things he’d been fond of in his previous life, and he hadn’t yet seen them since he’d woken up in this one. He really wanted Junqing to be there with him when he did.

Unable to dissuade him, Mu Hanzhang had to change his clothes and go with him.

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AT THE IMMORTAL FEAST, Li Yanqing happily rubbed his hands together. “Your Highness!” He paused. Noticing the new face behind Jing Shao, he paused, his smile turning a bit wary. “And this is?”

“This is Master Jun, a resident scholar at my estate. There’s no need to be concerned.” Done with explaining himself, Jing Shao pulled Mu Hanzhang to sit down with him. “The reason I invited you here today is to let you know that this business will no longer be feasible moving forward.”

“Your Highness!” The color drained from Li Yanqing’s face. His eyes darted back and forth, then he lowered his voice and said, “Did something happen?”

“There’s been some talk at court, so we’d better be a bit more discreet this year.” Jing Shao poured himself a cup of wine. “Go see Ren Feng. I’ve already sketched out a rough plan with him. He’ll tell you how to proceed from here on out.” While he’d visited the villa to fight yesterday, he had also handed over instructions regarding this salt permit business.

After Li Yanqing left, Mu Hanzhang was silent for a moment before he asked, “Did Your Highness encounter something at court?”

Jing Shao looked toward him, his lips curling into a smile. “Not yet. However —have you heard about this legend that’s been going around in the capital?”

Mu Hanzhang lowered his gaze and thought about it. “You mean the one about how Prince Cheng’s very name could cure a child of night tantrums?”

“Mm-hm.” His Junqing really was exceptionally intelligent. Talking to him certainly was wonderfully easy.

“This issue needs to be addressed by treating both the symptoms and the root cause. For now, we must first take care of the symptoms,” Mu Hanzhang said, rotating the wine cup in his hand, slowly stroking its rim.

Chapter 14:
Green Plums

JING SHAO'S EYES LIT UP as he inched a bit closer to his wife. "Which symptoms? And what is the root cause?" He had no idea how he was supposed to deal with these rumors; his only current plan was to keep any and all evidence under wraps, stay inconspicuous, and hope that the rumors would naturally die away.

"The so-called symptoms would be the rumors themselves. As for the root cause, that would be the one spreading those rumors. Or, perhaps, the group of people doing so." Mu Hanzhang looked up at him, and when he saw that Jing Shao had understood, he continued, "For now, we must address the rumor itself. As the saying goes, 'Repeated slander can turn gold into slag,' and if the rumors circulate widely enough, it will become the truth. Father may be able to laugh it off now, but that may not be the case in a few years."

"Junqing!" Jing Shao grabbed his hand holding the wine cup. For a moment, he could believe Junqing had also been reborn, but he immediately dismissed the idea. A reborn Junqing would never have failed to notice the difference between him and his previous incarnation. But if Junqing hadn't been reborn, then his insight and wisdom were truly not to be underestimated!

"Your Highness?" Mu Hanzhang was quite perplexed, unsure why this man had suddenly grabbed his hand.

Realizing that his behavior seemed a bit strange, Jing Shao hastily explained himself. "I'm just overjoyed that you're willing to help me." He did not let go of Mu Hanzhang's hand.

Mu Hanzhang lowered his eyes self-consciously, pulling back. "I've already married you. Who else would I help, if not you?"

"Junqing…" Jing Shao stared at the man sitting in front of him; he was in possession of a talent immense enough to save the world, yet despite having to humble himself by marrying him, not only did he not seek to do him harm, he was even willing to offer his intelligence and strategical insight for Jing Shao's benefit. His past-life self had indeed been foolish beyond measure. He couldn't help but reach out, pulling Mu Hanzhang into a tight embrace. "In this life, should you never forsake me, I, Jing Shao, shall never let you down."

Mu Hanzhang leaned against his chest, bewildered, with absolutely no clue why this man was suddenly so emotional. Was it because this was no place to talk, and Jing Shao was interrupting him on purpose? Considering that they were in a crowded restaurant with many pairs of prying eyes, what he meant to say next certainly couldn't be said lightly, and so he stopped speaking as well. "Um, let's—let's eat first."

It was only then that Jing Shao remembered that the two of them hadn't even had lunch yet. "Of course, you must be hungry. We should eat." Li Yanqing had ordered a table full of good food, but he'd rushed off to see Ren Feng before taking a single bite. If they didn't eat soon, it would get cold.

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THE TWO WERE IN NO HURRY to return to the estate after lunch. Jing Shao took his consort for a leisurely stroll along the main street as a means to aid digestion. They were both exceptionally good-looking individuals; one sternly handsome, the other kindly and warm as jade, and as they were walking hand in hand down the street—though it was actually Jing Shao forcibly grasping Mu Hanzhang's hand and refusing to let go—they drew the attention of many passersby.

Resigned, Mu Hanzhang let himself be pulled along. "Where are we going?" As he couldn't keep calling him Your Highness outside, he'd had to omit the title.

"To the south side of the city," said Jing Shao as he took a turn from the street into a shop where he bought a pound of sunflower seeds. Then, he led Mu Hanzhang through a maze of alleyways until they finally arrived at a rather aged and worn-down shop.

The shop didn't have a name, only a wooden plaque that hung on the wall with two lines written upon it: *On a bamboo horse, my love once came; we played with green plums, by my chamber bed.*[7]

They crossed the threshold and stepped into the shop; inside, everything was made of bamboo, polished to a sheen. The floor wasn't tiled but was instead entirely earthen. Bamboo had also been planted in each of the shop's four corners, making the place appear rather elegant and tranquil.

"What a nice place." Mu Hanzhang couldn't help praising it.

"You must be a cultured person to not mind the humble state of my shop, sir." A hearty, laughing voice trailed in through the back door, before a woman who looked to be in her thirties in a plum-red skirt walked in from the rear courtyard, carrying a big jar.

"Miss Mei, you're doing well, I'm sure." Jing Shao seemed rather familiar with this place, and he smiled as he greeted its proprietress.

Miss Mei? Mu Hanzhang shot a bemused look at the man next to him. This woman was clearly wearing a formal skirt only worn by married women, and moreover, she was already in the autumn of her years. How could he still call her Miss Mei? How excessively flippant of him.

Jing Shao looked back at him innocently and pulled him toward the wine cabinet.

"Brat. Still as impertinent as ever." The proprietress put down the wine jar and walked behind the high counter. "What would you like?"

"One small bottle of green plum wine, and bring us two wine cups." Jing Shao took out a piece of silver and placed it on the bamboo counter.

The proprietress took the money, put a bottle of wine and two cups into a small bamboo basket, and tossed it to him. "Catch!"

Looking back up at Mu Hanzhang, she smiled and said, "You don't look familiar, sir, but you have an extraordinary presence—you must be a scholar. Next time you come by, I'll be sure to give you a discount."

Jing Shao was immediately opposed to this. He pulled the man next to him into his arms and declared, “He’s my newly wedded wife; don’t even think about making a move on him!”

The proprietress’s face fell instantly, and she loudly smacked the counter with a bamboo strip. “Get outta here! Next time I’ll charge you double!”

Laughing, Jing Shao escorted his consort quickly out of the shop.

“This shop…” Mu Hanzhang’s brows furrowed—this was all so strange.

Jing Shao smiled. He stuffed the paper bag of sunflower seeds into Mu Hanzhang’s hand and carried the green plum wine himself, freeing himself up to go back to holding hands. “It’s a very long story.”

This woman’s surname was Mei, *plum*, and she was an orphan. The boy next door to her had been an orphan as well, and the two had depended on each other throughout their childhoods. The girl had inherited the art of wine-brewing passed down through her family, and she had brewed wine at home while the boy had peddled the wine, allowing them to make a small living together. The boy had joined the army at sixteen and had promised to marry her once he’d made a name for himself.

When Jing Shao finally had joined the army, the boy had already become a vanguard, saving every last tael of his salary with a goofy smile on his face, saying he was going to use it to marry his childhood sweetheart “Miss Green Plum” when he got home. Unfortunately, only one year later, that man died on the battlefield, and Miss Mei never married.

By the time the story was over, the two had already walked into a forest of peach trees. Third Month was when peach blossoms were at their most radiant; as Mu Hanzhang started becoming aware of his surroundings again, he was met by a sea of peach blossoms, an endless expanse of bright pink that stretched all the way to the horizon.

“It’s so lovely,” Mu Hanzhang murmured. The scenery was beautiful, and so was the story. Unfortunately, the story’s ending shared the same fate as these petals that fell as far as the eye could see—scattered by the wind.

Noticing that he seemed to be in low spirits, Jing Shao hugged Mu Hanzhang from behind, resting his chin on his shoulder. “Mister Wang was a good person. When I first started living in the army camp, I couldn’t handle the slop there and skipped quite a few meals. He didn’t even know I was a prince, and he still caught small birds and roasted them for me.” And that was why he’d always taken care of this Miss Mei in secret.

“Your Highness is actually very kind.” The corners of Mu Hanzhang’s lips turned up slightly.

Jing Shao smiled to himself. Kind? He didn’t believe that word applied to him at all. He merely thought generosity should be returned and vengeance meted out; that was all. But if this could change Junqing’s impression of him, then he’d just have to let him think that way.

He took his consort toward the center of the peach forest. It wasn’t long before they came upon a charming little pavilion.

“This is such a lovely place. Why isn’t anyone else here?” Mu Hanzhang unwrapped the package of sunflower seeds and poured them each a cup of plum

wine.

Jing Shao smiled; he explained this was his brother Jing Chen's private garden, so naturally no one would dare to simply wander in. Junqing had been so engrossed in his story that he hadn't even noticed them passing through a little moon gate—there were even guards standing on either side of it.

Having heard this, Mu Hanzhang finally understood why Jing Shao had brought him here. This place was closed to outsiders and surrounded by open space, completely preventing eavesdropping—and so he continued the discussion they had dropped at the Immortal Feast earlier.

"If Your Highness truly has no intention to seize the throne, then there's no real rush to rebuild your reputation." Mu Hanzhang picked up his wine cup. It was cheaply made of bamboo, yet still quite charming. "However, we cannot let this gossip keep circulating unchecked either. The best way to deal with it is to fight fire with fire!"

"What do you mean?" This was the first time Jing Shao had ever heard of such a method, and he couldn't help but lean in a bit.

"The person spreading these rumors is simply envious of Your Highness's achievements. Therefore, to combat this, we must find an opponent Your Highness despises and spread around some negative tidbits about him. Whether they're true or not doesn't really matter; they just have to sound unpleasant." Mu Hanzhang's beautiful eyes narrowed slightly and glinted with cunning. "The masses don't care about the truth; as long as it sounds sensational, they'll happily pass it on. In that way, the rumors about Your Highness will naturally fall to the wayside."

Jing Shao's eyes widened; apparently, Junqing had already guessed that the source of the rumors must have been one of his two half brothers, or perhaps the empress consort. And if they could freely fabricate lies, then so could he!

Jing Shao broke into hearty laughter. "That would've never occurred to me until you said it! Junqing, you're far more wicked than I am!" As he laughed, he also felt incredibly fortunate—in his past life, if the empress consort had been assisted by the person in front of him rather than his foolish little concubines, he might have died much earlier.

"This one is merely discussing the matter as it stands."

Being described in such a way by Jing Shao made Mu Hanzhang a little self-conscious, and without thinking, he rubbed harder along the edge of the cup with his finger. Unfortunately, the edge of the cup hadn't been carefully polished, and he gave himself a small splinter. Frowning at the sharp pain, he looked down to see a round drop of blood already beading on his fingertip.

"Junqing!" Jing Shao immediately swooped in, clutched his injured hand, and pulled out the splinter with practiced ease.

As all ten fingers had a direct connection to the heart, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but gasp sharply as the wound kept bleeding. But Jing Shao's next move shocked him silent.

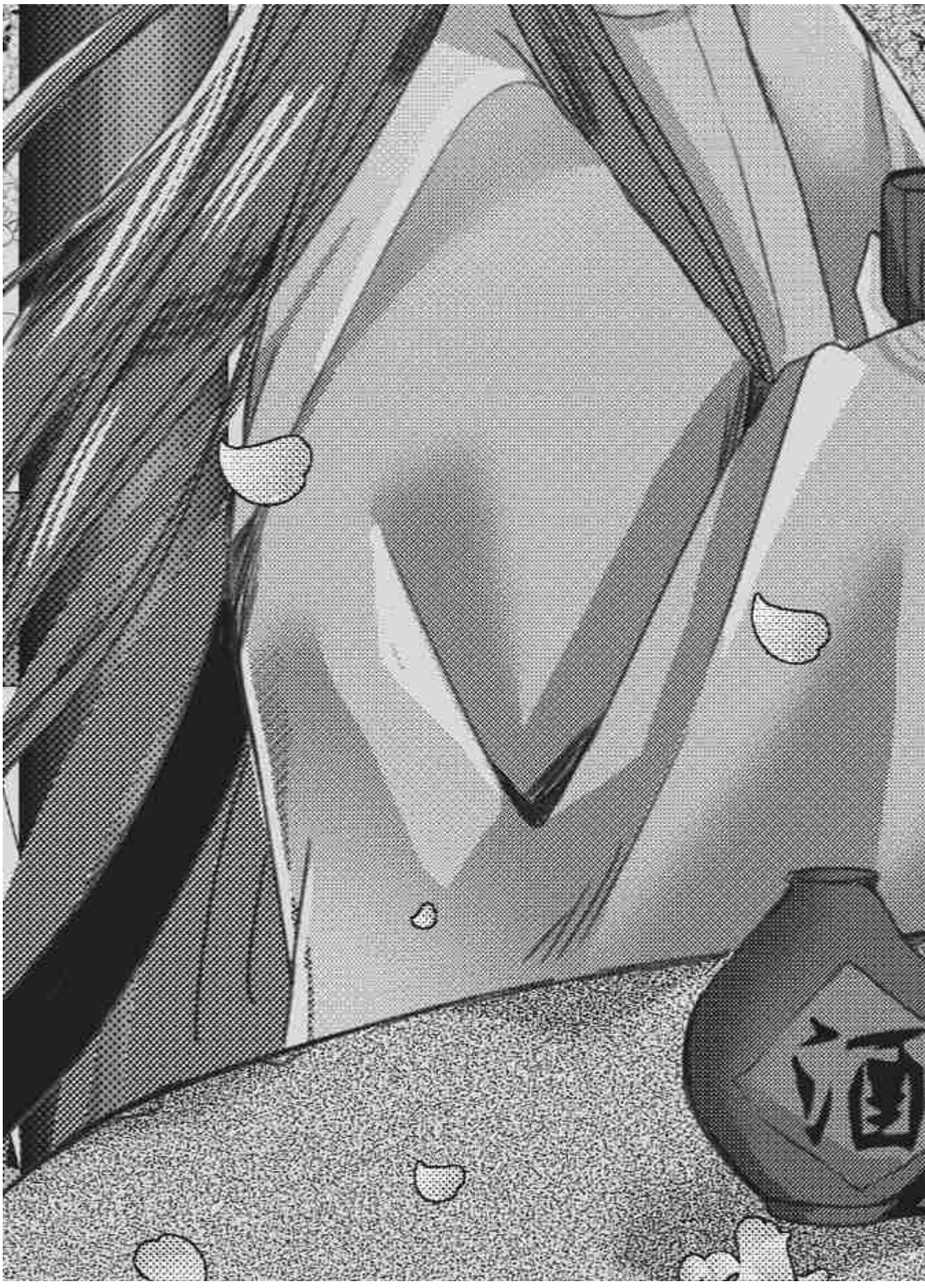
Heart aching at the sight of the blood endlessly seeping from that slender jade-like finger, Jing Shao took it into his mouth, licking away the blood, and then sucked on it to remove any remaining splinter under the skin. When he looked up, Mu Hanzhang's face was as red as a ripe plum. Briefly meeting his gaze, Mu Hanzhang quickly lowered his eyes, flustered.

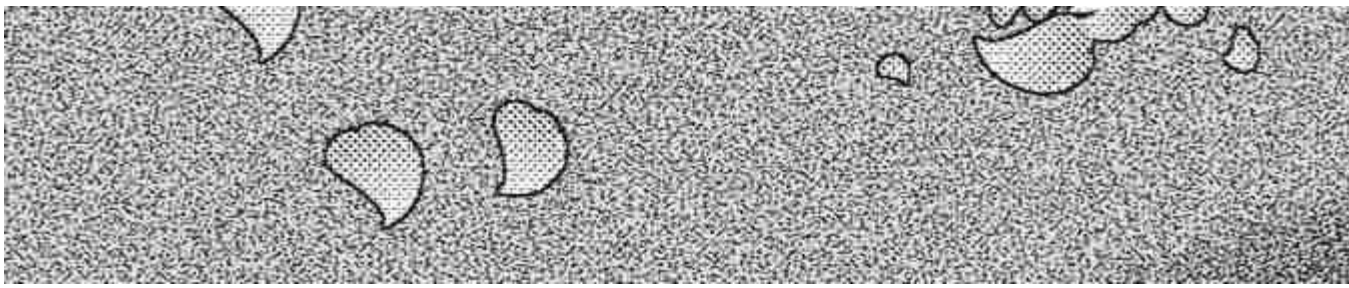
Only then did Jing Shao realize how provocative his actions had been. With a gentle rain of peach petals swirling behind Mu Hanzhang, Jing Shao found the bashful man before him as beautiful as a peach blossom immortal. He couldn't help but pull his consort—so embarrassed he seemed about to burst into flame—into his arms, and with one hand holding the back of his head, he pressed a kiss to his lips.

Mu Hanzhang moaned as scorching lips pressed and slid against his own. Having been ambushed, he'd no chance to think of resisting. However, once something soft and wet slipped between his lips and attempted to coax his mouth open, he was left utterly stunned.

"Your Highness—" An attempt to speak turned into a moan as Jing Shao took this opportunity to slip his nimble tongue past Mu Hanzhang's teeth, sweeping across his soft palate. As this novel sensation sent a tremor through his body, Mu Hanzhang suddenly managed the strength to push Jing Shao away.

Not expecting this in the slightest, Jing Shao was shoved right out of the pavilion. In reflex, he reached out to grab at a peach tree, but to his surprise, the branch he'd taken hold of, which just so happened to be damaged by pests, snapped with a loud *crack*.





And so, His Highness the handsome and dignified Prince Cheng—valorous in battle, kind at heart, in the middle of teasing his wife—crashed to the ground, flat on his back with his limbs in the air!

Chapter 15:
Madness

THE TWO SPENT THE DAY enjoying their time outside, and when they returned to the estate, the sky had already darkened, and it was past dinnertime. As the womenfolk lived in the west wing, and their doors there were locked much earlier than the east wing, Mu Hanzhang exempted the concubines from their evening greetings so as not to delay the locking of their doors.

Behind the screen in the prince's chambers, a full tub of hot water had been prepared; imported aromatic spices had been gently infused into the water, and on the surface floated a fresh layer of peach petals.

Since Jing Shao was already taking off his clothes and getting ready to bathe, Mu Hanzhang grabbed a book and sat on the daybed, waiting for him to finish first. But Jing Shao pulled him over and said, "Junqing, you threw me onto the ground today, and my butt still hurts."

"This one…" As Mu Hanzhang thought about the incident from earlier, his face pinkened once more. He'd already apologized earlier in the afternoon, so why was Jing Shao still refusing to let it go?

"Apologies need some sincerity." The prince grabbed his hand and started pulling him behind the screen. "I'm injured. Help me bathe."

Mu Hanzhang's eyes widened to stare at him. This was the first time he'd ever heard of an injury to the buttocks making bathing more difficult. "I…I don't know how…"

"That's fine. I'll help you wash up too." Jing Shao happily finished stripping himself of all his clothes and hopped into the tub. He turned to the princely consort, who was still frozen in place, and slapped the side of the wooden tub. "Come in, already. Otherwise, I'm going to punish you by making you put ointment on me later."

Ointment? Mu Hanzhang bit his bottom lip. He weighed his options: to rub ointment onto his husband's rear end in bed or to face him naked in the bathtub. It seemed to him that either of those things were rather risky. However, if he chose to apply ointment, he could at least remain clothed…

"Junqing?" Jing Shao watched his consort in amusement. The man was biting his lower lip, deep in thought, and Jing Shao found it utterly adorable.

"Well then—this one had better help Your Highness with the ointment." This said, he rushed out without a backward glance.

"Pfft!" Jing Shao leaned over the edge of the tub and let out a full-bellied laugh.

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ONCE MU HANZHANG had finished his own bath and emerged from behind the screen in a fresh silk robe, what met him was the sight of a certain imperial prince wearing nothing but an undershirt, sprawled over the bed with his bare bottom in full view and engrossed in a book of military strategy.

"Your—Your Highness…" Mu Hanzhang's cheeks flamed red at once. How could this man be so…

"Junqing!" Noticing his consort, Jing Shao tossed the strategy book aside and dutifully handed over a little bottle.

Resigned, Mu Hanzhang crawled to the inner side of the bed. He poured some ointment into his palm and stared at what little bruising there was on either side of the perfect twin curves before him. The rest of what fell within his sight was also well-proportioned and muscular, filled with obvious strength and agility. Even the two slender legs sitting close together, with their streamlined muscles, looked dangerously, powerfully beautiful.

Mu Hanzhang only snapped out of his daze when some ointment dripped from his fingers onto those glorious curves. He stole a glance at Jing Shao, and realizing that he wasn't looking at him, breathed out softly in relief. Then he put his hand to a bruise, slick with ointment.

As that warm, soft touch began to caress his skin, Jing Shao felt immediate regret. It was far too nice, so much so that his body quickly reacted to his consort's massage. He silently complained: Junqing's fear of their wedding night hadn't yet faded, so how was he supposed to put out these newly kindled flames?

"All done." Mu Hanzhang climbed off the bed to put the ointment bottle away, which gave Jing Shao's overheated body a chance to cool down a little.

Jing Shao hummed a reply but kept himself sprawled over the bed, unmoving.

"Your Highness, get some sleep." Since Jing Shao hadn't moved, Mu Hanzhang had to crawl back over him to the inside of the bed. He pulled the covers over them both.

"Mm-hmm… Since there's ointment on my behind, I'll just sleep on my front tonight." Jing Shao buried his face into the pillow and slept on his stomach, right on top of his self-inflicted misery.

JING SHAO LEFT FIRST THING in the morning for the second prince's estate in order to discuss the plan Junqing had crafted with him the day before. Following the princely consort's instructions, Duofu carried all of the ledgers from previous years into the small study.

"Your Highness, here are the ledgers from the past three years. Are you really going to read through all of them?" Yun Zhu swallowed as he stared at the foot-tall stack of ledgers.

"Mm-hmm." Mu Hanzhang only hummed an acknowledgment as he divided the stack into three according to the year, then began to read from the earliest entry.

"The estate's accountant should be the one reading the ledgers. Why do you need to do all this work?" Yun Zhu was a bit confused. If His Highness wanted to learn how to manage the household, all he had to do was ask Chief Steward Duofu or

see how Madam Song handled it, right?

Mu Hanzhang glanced at his frowning young page and smiled silently. The ledgers contained many useful things: the household's food and clothing expenses, favors given and repaid, the transfer of staff—all this information could be learned. As a matter of fact, the governance of a country was much the same; by looking at the Ministry of Revenue's ledger, one could tell if the emperor was incompetent and if the dynasty was a prosperous one.

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AFTER A WHILE, Mu Hanzhang got tired and took a tea break, and Yun Zhu shared the information he had gathered. "I heard Madam Song did an inventory of the treasury yesterday, and she spent the entire morning inside with several servants."

"I see." Mu Hanzhang patted Yun Zhu's head and rewarded him with a handful of sticky-rice candy he'd bought yesterday. If she was taking inventory of the treasury at a time like this, it must mean that there were discrepancies between the ledgers and what was actually inside it.

Yun Zhu ate a piece of the candy. "Your Highness's monthly allowance for the Third Month was never disbursed by the treasury office. I went to fetch some Xuan paper yesterday and almost didn't manage to get any." Bringing this up made Yun Zhu feel a bit indignant—thankfully the princely consort was a man and lived in the east wing with the prince, so the prince's allocation could cover all his expenses. If a woman had married into the household, wouldn't this mean she wouldn't even be able to get food to eat?!

It was only then that Mu Hanzhang remembered that he no longer had any cash on hand. It might be troublesome if there was an emergency.

Mu Hanzhang couldn't go through all the ledgers at once, so he ate lunch and had a nap before starting to head back to the study.

"Your Highness, you're back!" When he left the living quarters, Jing Shao was walking briskly inside, and he almost ran right into him.

Jing Shao stared blankly at him, his eyes red-rimmed. When he got a good look at just who was in front of him, he reached out and grabbed Mu Hanzhang's wrist before turning and heading outside again.

"Your Highness—" Mu Hanzhang staggered as he tried to keep up, grunting as he tripped and almost fell. Stumbling, he was dragged to the front courtyard.

The servants gathered to watch the commotion, whispering among themselves, wondering whether the princely consort had somehow angered His Highness.

Without a word, Jing Shao pulled himself and Mu Hanzhang up onto his horse and squeezed the horse's belly tightly with his calves. Shadow neighed and darted out like an arrow.

The steed galloped down the highway outside the capital. Disoriented, Jing Shao felt as if he had returned to that snowy day before his rebirth, when they were running for their lives. The past several days of warmth and comfort had made him forget, for a little while, how he had felt when he first reopened his eyes.

Mu Hanzhang could feel the agitation in Jing Shao's heart as he leaned against his back, and slowly, he tightened his arms around him. Sensing the strength wrapped around his waist, Jing Shao reached down to cover Mu Hanzhang's folded hands with one of his own as they galloped all the way to his villa in the outskirts.

Ignoring the startled cries of the guards in the courtyard, he rode Shadow straight to the demonstration platform. With a light step on the stirrups, he leapt onto the wooden platform, drew a long spear from the rack, and started fighting whomever was there without even checking who it was.

Ren Feng, who had been in the middle of demonstrating a move to his subordinates, was rather startled, but he instinctively raised a hand to block his strike. "Your Highness?!" When he realized it was Jing Shao, he took three frantic steps backward. To his surprise, Jing Shao simply charged at him. Ren Feng turned around and drew a long staff, barely blocking an overhand strike from the spear.

Jing Shao fought as if he were on the battlefield—desperately, as if his life were at risk. In no time at all, he threw Ren Feng, who was fighting too cautiously to be effective, off the stage. With no opponent left, Jing Shao continued to perform alone on the stage with his spear, which danced like a wandering dragon, tracing silver afterimages in the air.

Mu Hanzhang frowned, staring at the man on the platform who was acting as though he'd lost his mind, and quietly asked Ren Feng to take his men and temporarily leave the area.

The sun slipped from the mountain's peak to its foothills, and drizzle began to fall from the somber sky. Shadow had already been led to the stables, and everyone around the platform had left. Mu Hanzhang watched the man, still gracefully brandishing his spear, and slowly, he stepped onto the stage.

Mu Hanzhang stood there beside him and said calmly in a voice without inflection, "Your Highness, it's getting dark."

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh! The sound of a blade cutting through the air never paused. The red tassels tied to the head of the spear whipped at the raindrops, scattering them in all directions.

Mu Hanzhang clenched his fist, turned around, and grabbed a broad saber, tossing it at the prince. "Jing Shao, calm down!"

Clang! The sound of the spearhead colliding with the steel blade brought Jing Shao back to his senses, and his spear paused mid-swing. Jing Shao raised his head and shot him a glance. Then, with a roaring howl at the sky, he leapt high into the air before bringing his spear slashing down on a wooden post, shattering it into pieces.

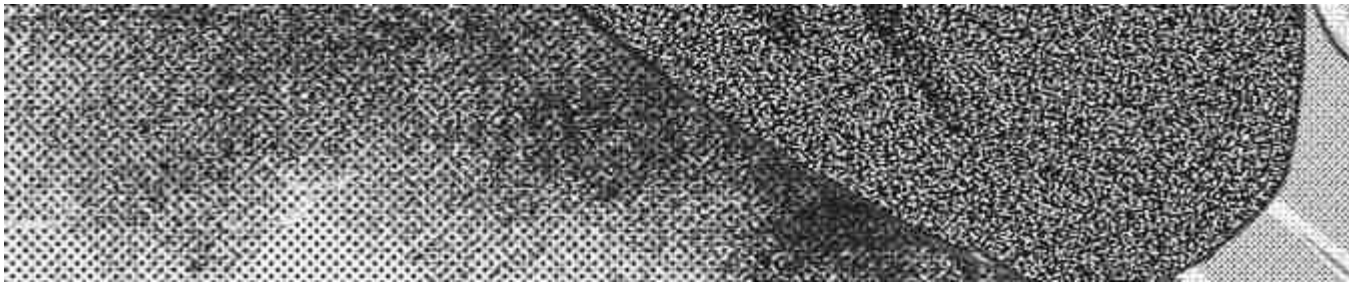
The silver spear fell with a clatter. Fresh blood dripped from Jing Shao's fingers onto the ground, mixing with the pattering rain and quickly turning it pale red.

Running over, Mu Hanzhang took Jing Shao's right hand. The force of the impact had torn the web of his thumb, and there were blood blisters on his palm. He took a silk handkerchief out of his sleeve and applied pressure to the bleeding wound. Jing Shao turned his face up to the sky. Rain fell into his eyes and slid down his cheeks.

"Junqing… They killed my mother…my mother…" Jing Shao murmured. He wasn't speaking very loud at all, almost whispering, yet Mu Hanzhang heard him clearly.

Exhausted, Jing Shao slid to the ground. Mu Hanzhang crouched down next to him and slowly took him into his arms. “Shao…what happened?”

“Junqing…Junqing…” Jing Shao buried his face in his shoulder. Today, after his brother had listened to his plans, Jing Chen had felt relieved that his little brother had finally grown up. And so, Jing Chen had told him something that he’d never told him before, which included the true nature of the late empress’s death.



Chapter 16:
Needing Money

FOR TWO HOURS, they sat on the ground being pelted by the rain; Jing Shao neither spoke nor moved, and so Mu Hanzhang silently kept him company and held him for the entire time. Only once Jing Shao had calmed down completely did Mu Hanzhang drag him inside to bathe and to change his clothes.

Even though Jing Shao used the villa as a training ground for his guards, it was still an imperial family retreat so it had everything that one might need, even flowing hot springs. There was a rather large hot spring pool inside Jing Shao's master courtyard suite, but due to the rain, they couldn't use the open-air bath. Instead, they had a soak in the small indoor pool to drive away the chill.

"Achoo!" Mu Hanzhang had talked Jing Shao into drinking a bowl of ginger soup, but ended up the one sneezing.

"You should hurry and have some too." Jing Shao handed him another bowl and then grabbed a towel to dry his hair. He'd remembered how frail Junqing was, after falling into freezing water as a child. Though spring rains were not cold, anyone could get sick after sitting in the rain for two hours, let alone Junqing. With this in mind, he tried to encourage Mu Hanzhang back into the hot springs to soak for a while longer.

"This one is in good health." Having perceived Jing Shao's intention, Mu Hanzhang smiled and said, "I once knelt in the rain for six hours without falling ill, and besides—" Noticing the change in Jing Shao's expression, Mu Hanzhang realized that he'd accidentally let something slip again and immediately started to pull him into bed.

Since the villa was built for rest and leisure, the bed here was much larger than the one at the estate. Jing Shao crawled farther in and lay down next to Mu Hanzhang. His restrained fury was clear in his eyes. "Why?"

"My nanny made a mistake, so I knelt in order to save her." Mu Hanzhang leaned back against the pillows propped up at the head of the bed, took Jing Shao's hand, and began to dress his wound with some bandages he'd found. "Isn't punitive kneeling normal for children?"

When he was much younger, his wet nurse's son had been caught stealing from the estate, and Marquise Beiwei had wanted to expel both her and her son. When Mu Hanzhang had fallen into the lake years ago, it was only due to his nanny's constant, tireless care that he managed to survive. Ultimately, the real reason Marquise Beiwei wanted to destroy his nanny's livelihood was because she despised Mu Hanzhang. He'd knelt for six hours; in the end, it was simply because his grandmother couldn't bear to watch any longer that the wet nurse and her son managed to keep their jobs, although they were sent away to the farms.

A bitter smile tugged at the corner of Jing Shao's mouth. "That's true enough. I once knelt in front of the Hall of Diligent Governance for a full day and night."

Mu Hanzhang covered him with a quilt, then slid down to lie sideways on the bed himself, his head propped up on one hand to look at him. "A whole day and

night?" Had Prince Cheng somehow also been mistreated in the palace despite being a legitimate son?

"Back then, I was dead set on joining the army. Father said that if I could kneel before the Hall of Diligent Governance for twenty-four hours, he'd let me go." Jing Shao smiled self-deprecatingly. "Without Mother's protection, my brother and I were even worse off than the first prince, the son of a favored concubine. Back then, my only plan was to lead troops, hold military power, and kill off everyone who bullied me!"

Mu Hanzhang's brows furrowed. He put a hand on Jing Shao's head and stroked his hair gently but said not a word.

The gentle caress made Jing Shao so comfortable that his eyes closed in contentment. He took a deep breath, and the light, pleasant scent of Junqing's body filled his nose, gradually calming the agitation in his heart. "When I was little, Mother would personally sew tiny robes for me, and she made these really delicious osmanthus jellies. Once, I killed her most cherished orchid, so she tried to give me a beating, but before I'd even started crying, she cried first—she held me and asked me if it hurt…" As he spoke, his eyes gradually grew wet with tears.

A true man holds back his tears until grief strikes deep into his heart. Someone as strong and unyielding as Jing Shao shedding tears made it even more heart-wrenching. Seeing Jing Shao like this, Mu Hanzhang felt an unbearable tenderness for him. He slowly lowered his head and placed a gentle kiss in the furrow of his brow.

Jing Shao opened his eyes to look at him, then rolled over and buried his face in Mu Hanzhang's chest, not wanting him to see him like this.

Mu Hanzhang lay down and wrapped his arms around him, and stroked his back gently as though he were soothing a small wounded animal. Exhausted, Jing Shao gradually fell asleep, calmed and comforted by his touch.

Little Shao-er, you're going to have a little brother or sister soon…

Even if you have little sisters and brothers, little Shao-er is still going to be our favorite…

She's bleeding! It's a major hemorrhage! Dizzying silhouettes shifted and spun around him. Who was screaming? Where was his mother?

Shao, don't be scared. It's all right, it's all over now… What a wonderful voice…but who was it? The bloodred tableau before him slowly faded away, leaving behind only a gentle face. Under cool spring showers, a peerlessly handsome man was smiling at him. The nightmare faded away, leaving nothing but a sense of tranquility in the ethereal haze of his dream.

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THE NEXT DAY, Jing Shao woke up to find the man who'd been up comforting him all night asleep next to him. Looking at that serene, sleeping face, he recalled the gentle kiss he'd been given last night and was finally able to truly appreciate it. Even though it had only landed between his brows, he'd felt overcome with joy, his heart pounding. Slowly, he leaned in even closer to place a kiss on the

dark shadows under one of Junqing's eyes.

Mu Hanzhang slowly stirred to find a handsome face mere inches away, utterly stunning him for a moment until he managed to pull himself together. "Your Highness…"

"I already told you that you're not allowed to call me Your Highness in private, and every time you do, I'll punish you." Jing Shao sullenly pressed a firm kiss to his lips.

Mu Hanzhang blushed as he endured this "punishment." *How does this man manage to invent so many excuses to do that?* "But just calling you 'Shao' sounds so odd, and it's not as if you have a courtesy name… Did you have a nickname as a baby?"

"Mother and my older brother both called me 'Li'l Shao-er.'" Jing Shao didn't seem embarrassed by this at all, but the cutesy name gave Mu Hanzhang chills.

The corner of his mouth twitched, then he chuckled softly. "Li'l Shao…" He repeated it, mispronouncing a tone. "'Li'l Spoon.' What a lovely name indeed."

"It's 'Li'l Shao-er'!" Jing Shao said irritably.

"Mm-hmm, exactly. Li'l Spoon. I'll call you that too from now on." Mu Hanzhang patted his head, then got up to start getting dressed.

Jing Shao's eyes widened. Had his wife actually just teased him?!

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AS SOON AS JING SHAO returned to the estate, he was confronted by Master Yun, who informed him he'd have to deal with the consequences of galloping through the crowded market yesterday. Mu Hanzhang, meanwhile, returned to the east wing to catch up on sleep; no sense of loyalty at all.

"Your Highness, I have some leads on the matter that you asked me to investigate." Master Yun only brought up his new information once they had handled a pile of miscellaneous tasks. "Namely regarding the princely consort's childhood incident where he fell into a pond."

The household staff at the Marquis Beiwei Estate were replaced every three years. After so much time had passed, most people who might have witnessed the incident were no longer there. Even those who still worked there were quite secretive in regards to this incident—it seemed to be a taboo to mention it. After overcoming multiple hurdles, they'd finally determined that Mu Hanzhang's childhood nanny was at a particular farm under the Marquise Beiwei's name. And it was from her that they'd finally heard the whole story.

The Dowager Marquise Beiwei had made fur capes for each of her two grandsons; a fox-fur cape for Mu Lingbao and a rabbit-fur cape for Mu Hanzhang. Mu Hanzhang had been such a cute child that Mu Lingbao had thought his little brother's cape must have been better than his and had tried to grab it from him, pushing Mu Hanzhang into the lotus pond during the scuffle. Two other cousins had also been present at the scene, and the three kids had run off with the stolen cape, leaving three-year-old Mu Hanzhang floundering in a pond that was already covered

in a layer of thin ice. Thankfully, his wet nurse had rushed over to fish him out. He'd remained bedridden for six months before he'd finally managed to recover.

"Treacherous scum!" Jing Shao threw his teacup at the floor, furious at what had been uncovered. Clearly, Marquise Beiwei had fired as much of the staff as she could in order to protect her son's reputation and had made sure that anyone who remained never mentioned it again. There was no way the imperial family would approve someone who harmed his own kin as the future Marquis Beiwei.

Jing Shao paced, his hands folded behind his back, and then turned to Master Yun, saying, "I have two tasks for you. First, figure out Mu Lingbao's daily routine: any hobbies, acquaintances, and usual haunts. Second, get some people to spread the word in the capital that the Fourth Prince Jing Yu likes to eat raw meat. Do not elaborate further."

Master Yun could understand the purpose of the first task easily enough, but what was this thing about the fourth prince favoring raw meat?

"Didn't Jing Yu like the raw fish meat given as tribute by the Eastern Isles? All we're doing is leaving out the word 'fish.' Just do as I say." Jing Shao's lip curled into a sneer. They were just spreading rumors—apparently anyone could do that. If his killing of five hundred surrendered soldiers could turn into the slaughter of a hundred thousand prisoners of war, he had to wonder what the fourth prince's little quirk would turn into after some exaggeration. Truly something to look forward to!

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AFTER THESE REQUESTS, Jing Shao spent the next several days at home: keeping his wife company, practicing swordplay, and reading—savoring this rare moment of leisure. At the same time, Mu Hanzhang finished reviewing all three years of the estate's ledgers.

According to the monthly allowances on the ledgers, Madam Song received fifty taels of silver a month, so as the rightful consort, Mu Hanzhang would be receiving at least eighty taels. His issue of not having enough cash on hand would therefore soon be resolved. As Mu Hanzhang closed the last ledger, he sighed in relief. It really was a whole lot more than what he earned in his monthly stipend as a Provincial Graduate.

Suddenly realizing that he still had a stipend to claim, Mu Hanzhang handed a document to Yun Zhu. "Take this and fetch my stipend from last month." Although it was very modest, it was still an income. "The money you collect will be yours."

"Really?!" Yun Zhu perked up immediately. "Thank you, Your Highness!" Grabbing the sheet of paper from him and tucking it under his shirt, he happily ran out of the room.

"Young master!" Lanxuan rushed in.

"What's wrong?" Mu Hanzhang gestured for her to take her time.

"Nana Zhou's little girl came looking for you today and the bodyguards stopped her at the side gate, so I spoke to her at the door and—" Lanxuan spoke frantically, making little sense.

“What on earth is going on?” Mu Hanzhang frowned. “Did something happen to her family?” Nana Zhou was what he called his wet nurse. If she was sending her daughter out to speak with him after he’d already left the family, she must be in trouble.

“Her son broke his leg the other day, and they don’t have the money to get it treated. The people in their manor said that her family’s either old or crippled anyway, and that they’re freeloaders who don’t do any work, so they want to kick them out,” explained Lanting, who had rushed in behind Lanxuan and continued on her behalf in an attempt to avoid her peer’s inability to communicate aggravating the young master. “She came to you because she wanted to borrow some money.”

“I understand. You two may go.” Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together. He still didn’t have any actual money. There was some jewelry in his dowry, but to start pawning off his dowry as soon as he married into the household would be a great insult to his husband. That was something he absolutely must not do.

Out in the ornamental gardens, dressed in a set of fitted white robes, Jing Shao was wielding a long sword, going through a set of moves with fluid grace. Once done, he ended the routine and noticed his consort standing by the rockery. Tossing his sword to a nearby maid, he grabbed a towel to wipe his brow and approached Mu Hanzhang. With a soft chuckle at the hesitant look on his consort’s face, he inquired, “Junqing, is something the matter?”

Mu Hanzhang’s lips pressed together, and he lowered his eyes, softly asking, “Could you…lend me a hundred taels of silver?”

Chapter 17:
Rumors

JING SHAO STOOD THERE stunned for a long moment before he realized that his consort was trying to borrow money from him. He couldn't help frowning, but he took Mu Hanzhang by the hand and led him to the study in Zephyr Pavilion. There, he took out a small ebony box embellished in gold and handed it to him. "Take this for now, and let me know if it's not enough."

"Something's happened to my wet nurse's family, and I don't have any cash right now," Mu Hanzhang admitted, his head lowered. "Once I collect the rent at my farm, I'll pay you back." As he spoke, he opened the box. It contained approximately a hundred taels each in gold and silver, as well as five small stacks of banknotes of one thousand taels each.

"You try saying that again!" Jing Shao's temper flared in an instant. He reached out and grabbed Mu Hanzhang by the chin to force him to look at him.

Startled, Mu Hanzhang stared at the furious Jing Shao. Realization dawned on him then that it wasn't right for him to say he would pay money back to his husband. Pinching his lips, he said, "That farm has fairly poor yields, so this amount of money…I'm afraid I won't be able to repay it for ten or even twenty years."

Though it was clearly an excuse for not paying back his debt, Jing Shao's mood strangely improved. But still, he held Mu Hanzhang's chin, shaking it gently as he spoke. "If you need anything, just come to me. Taking care of you is my responsibility to begin with." Having said that, he pressed a kiss to those still pursed lips before merrily stepping away to continue practicing.

Mu Hanzhang looked at the ebony box in his hands and let out a soft sigh.

Taking out a hundred taels of silver, he told Lanting to take it to the farm, accompanied by a bodyguard. As he looked at the rest of his rather generous allowance, the gears in Mu Hanzhang's head began to spin. The properties allocated to him by the House of Beiwei were either barren woodland or farms with poor yields. He didn't have a single shop in the capital.

Mu Hanzhang's mother came from a mercantile background, so while he hadn't inherited his mother's skills of appraising artifacts and gauging the quality of silk, he was still capable of balancing books and managing a business. The five thousand taels Jing Shao had given him was enough to establish a restaurant in the capital. Even just using a part of it to buy a small shop would be a good idea; at least he would be doing more than sitting idle and depleting his resources.

Putting the ebony box safely away, Mu Hanzhang decided that he should go out in the next couple of days to search for suitable business opportunities. A gentleman must have a means of livelihood. He felt better having come up with an idea, but there was another thing improving his mood, which was the fact that today was the 15th of the Third Month. According to what they'd decided upon in the peony booklet, Jing Shao should be heading to Madam Song's room tonight. Jing Shao had been constantly clinging to him for kisses and hugs over the past several nights. Since Mu Hanzhang was also a man, he was well aware of how easy it would be to lose control if they kept this up. That was why he spent every day on edge and

only dared fall asleep once Jing Shao had drifted off.

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AFTER DINNER, Jing Shao once again sidled up to his consort as he waited for his food to digest. Mu Hanzhang sent a look to Duofu, and Duofu hesitantly scrunched his face into a wrinkled bun and coughed. “Your Highness, a while ago, His Highness set the schedule in the peony booklet, and tonight you should be staying with Madam Song.”

Jing Shao looked up at the prune-faced Duofu. “Peony booklet? What’s the schedule like?”

Mu Hanzhang retrieved the peony booklet and showed it to him. “First half of the month in the east wing, second half of the month in the west wing. Nine days with Madam Song, then three days each with the other concubines.”

Jing Shao furrowed his brow. “I’m not in the mood tonight,” he said. Then he yawned and climbed into bed.

Mu Hanzhang couldn’t force him to change his mind. *He must have trained for too long,* he thought. He didn’t dwell on it any further, reading a little while longer before climbing into bed himself. But as soon as he got into bed, Jing Shao turned over and pinned Mu Hanzhang beneath him.

“Your Highness…” Mu Hanzhang’s body instantly tensed.

Jing Shao reached out his hand and tugged; the bed veil fell at once. Mu Hanzhang felt even more nervous now and pushed both his hands against Jing Shao’s shoulders. Hadn’t he just said he wasn’t in the mood tonight?

Finding the reactions of the man beneath him rather interesting, Jing Shao slowly inched closer, gently kissing him on the side of the neck, before checking his expression. Mu Hanzhang’s eyes were tightly closed, and the fringes of his long eyelashes would not stop trembling. Unwilling to scare him any further, Jing Shao turned back over and wrapped him into his arms. “Let me touch you a bit, and I’ll let you go tonight.”

The prince’s directness made Mu Hanzhang’s face quickly turn red. “Touch… touch where?”

“Hmm…last time we got this far.” Jing Shao traced circles on those beautiful collarbones with his finger, and, feeling the body in his arms flinch ticklishly, he slightly pulled down the lapel of the man’s top. “We’ll just move down a little more, all right?”

Mu Hanzhang bit his lower lip, flustered, not knowing how to respond. Taking this as consent, Jing Shao lustfully slid his lightly calloused hand under Mu Hanzhang’s collar, gently caressing that fair chest. He sought around for his nipple, marveling at how nice his skin felt under his hand.

With his back to Jing Shao, Mu Hanzhang groaned low in his throat, one hand tightly clutching the bedsheets. He let his husband touch him freely until two fingers suddenly pinched one small bud. “Mm…don’t…” he moaned. A tingling sensation radiated from his chest, his body trembling involuntarily, and he finally couldn’t help

but trap the prince's naughty hand.

Jing Shao seemed not to feel embarrassed at all getting caught red-handed escalating his touching into squeezing. He pressed a smiling kiss to the forehead of the man in his arms, now damp with sweat, then covered him in a quilt and wrapped him back into his embrace. Beaming, he nuzzled against Mu Hanzhang before falling asleep.

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EVERY EVENING for the next several days, Jing Shao was either tired, or he said it was too late to visit the west wing. At any rate, the end result was that he would sleep in the east wing again. Mu Hanzhang speculated that Jing Shao might not like Lady Song, so he didn't press him further, but he did consider giving the other two concubines a few more days next month.

Jing Shao was supposed to return to morning court on the 18th of the Third Month, but he had submitted a memorial to delay his return, so on the 20th of the Third Month, His Highness Prince Cheng was still sound asleep on his wife's bed.

When he woke at dawn, finding the prince's big hand spread over his chest again, Mu Hanzhang sighed in resignation and reached in to remove it from beneath his clothing before slowly sitting up.

The repositioned Jing Shao groggily reached out and hugged Mu Hanzhang's waist, then with his eyes still closed, he snuggled closer and tried to keep sleeping.

"Aren't you going to the villa today? Still not getting up?" Mu Hanzhang nudged him and sighed again.

"There's no rush," Jing Shao murmured, burying his face in Mu Hanzhang's lap.

"You'll have to attend morning court by tomorrow, so it's best to finish taking care of everything today." Mu Hanzhang stared at the other man's exposed ear and couldn't resist tugging on it. "From his accent, that Ren Feng doesn't sound like someone from the capital. How did he end up your Imperial Guard Captain?"

"He used to be a famous vigilante in the criminal underground, but because he needed money, he washed his hands of that old life and started working for me." Jing Shao opened his eyes and rolled onto his back.

The criminal underground? And famous vigilantes from the epics? They actually existed? Upon hearing this, Mu Hanzhang couldn't contain his curiosity.

"The criminal underground really exists; it's just not as crazy as the books make it sound," Jing Shao said, shifting to get out of bed and stretch. "Next time we go out, I'll take you to meet some of those vigilantes."

He planned to ask Ren Feng to start recruiting talented and extraordinary individuals; according to his experiences in his past life, next year, in the 14th year of Hongzheng, the War of the Three Feudatories would begin. He needed to make all the necessary preparations before then.

Jing Shao left the estate for the day, and the idle Mu Hanzhang went for a walk, accompanied by Yun Zhu.

The main street of the capital city was always bustling with activity—from grand establishments like taverns, pawnshops, and antique shops, to smaller attractions such as street performers and sugar blowers, the variety of sights seemed endless.

"It's getting late, young master. Let's stop somewhere and get lunch," Yun Zhu suggested, rubbing at his flat, hungry stomach. Since they were outside and he couldn't call Mu Hanzhang Your Highness, he simply copied Lanting and Lanxuan and called him young master.

Mu Hanzhang smiled and shot a glance at the food-loving Yun Zhu. "Where to?"

"The Flavor of Nostalgia, of course," said Yun Zhu, immediately excited. "Now's the best time to go. Any later and it'll be full."

Although Mu Hanzhang rarely went out, he had heard of The Flavor of Nostalgia, a restaurant that had opened only two years ago. It was known for its particularly delicious Henan cuisine, and business had always been booming.

The Flavor of Nostalgia was hardly exquisitely furnished, but it was clean and orderly, with a large number of tables and chairs. Undoubtedly extra tables had been added because business was so good. Soon after the two sat down, more people arrived and were seated, and before they knew it, the place was already packed.

"Young master, do you know who the owner of this place is?" Yun Zhu leaned in to whisper to Mu Hanzhang.

"Who?" Mu Hanzhang took a sip of tea, his gaze falling on the young proprietor behind the counter who was engrossed in his accounting. The man had a towering frame and rugged features, yet he was dressed in a robe of emerald green, which was truly quite odd.

"That man is the vice-minister of revenue's wife," Yun Zhu said cryptically. The vice-minister of revenue was a southerner, and while he was quite handsome, he was rather short. Meanwhile, his wife was a manly northerner, impressively tall, and powerfully built. His colleagues at court made no shortage of jokes at this vice-minister's expense.

"Oh?" "Oh?" When Mu Hanzhang heard this, his eyes lit up. If the vice-minister of revenue's wife could run a restaurant, then surely it shouldn't cause any gossip if he opened up a few shops himself. With this in mind, Mu Hanzhang had half a mind to befriend this restaurant owner, but he didn't know how well Jing Shao got on with the vice-minister of revenue, so he planned to ask him when he got home.

"Hey, have you heard? Lately, people are saying that the fourth prince likes to eat human flesh," a person at the table next to them quietly said to their companion.

"It's hardly as disgusting as that," someone nearby corrected. "From what I heard, he actually likes to eat placenta. That's really good for you, and it's sought after by some rich people."

"None of you have it right." Someone at the next table overheard their conversation and laughed, sidling up to them dramatically. "Apparently, the fourth prince has been frail ever since he was born, and a Daoist priest back then said that he had to eat a bowl of raw baby flesh every year in order to live a long life."

Mu Hanzhang kept his head low and drank his tea silently. The Chen Empire was rather progressive, allowing for gentlemen wives and open discussions of state

affairs, so rumors about the imperial family could spread quickly. But he wondered what rumor Jing Shao could have come up with for it to have gotten so bizarre already!

Chapter 18:
Young Vice Minister

ON THE 21ST OF THE THIRD MONTH, Prince Cheng finally returned to court.

Jing Shao stood in the resplendent Grand Hall, looking at the unfamiliar familiar faces before him and feeling as if it had been a lifetime. In his previous life, he had knelt right in the center of this Grand Hall, forced to listen to everyone recount his alleged crimes.

The Minister of Revenue had impeached him for trafficking salt permits, the minister of works had accused him of embezzlement through large-scale construction, and even the censor had filed complaints of his deceiving the emperor and planning a coup. He scanned their faces one by one; Duke Mao was the fourth prince's future father-in-law, and Earl Yongchang was the empress consort's brother, while the two from the Ministry of Revenue and Ministry of Works were loyal to the emperor. The rest of them had simply been content to be complicit.

The empress consort's relatives would have to be curbed somehow, and as for the two ministers—Jing Shao turned his attention to the vice-minister of revenue standing behind the minister. Aside from those in Jing Chen's camp, the only one willing to say a word in his favor had been this young vice minister. He originally belonged to the reformist faction, and he wasn't inflexible. He had been the Primus Scholar in the exams five years ago, and his career had been smooth sailing all the way to vice-minister of revenue, but once there, even by the time Jing Shao's life had fallen apart, he had seen no further promotion. Perhaps Jing Shao could bring him over to his side and promote him to Minister.

While he pondered this, his brother elbowed him in the side. He jerked his head up to discover that his father and the assembled ministers were all looking right at him. The Imperial Censor Fen Jie was standing in the very center of the Grand Hall.

"The rumors about the fourth prince," Jing Chen prompted him, whispering without moving a muscle on his face.

Jing Shao understood and took a step forward. "Your son believes that the words of the general masses are merely idle chatter, hardly worth much thought." It was a conventional response. Emperor Hongzheng subsequently turned his gaze toward Jing Chen.

Jing Chen stepped forward and said, "As the sages of old said, 'Just as the swallow builds its nest in a tangerine tree and wind comes from an empty cave,' things always arise from a source, their nature shaped accordingly. That such a tale has risen among the people means there must be a reason behind it. It would be best to clarify such things swiftly to avoid tarnishing fourth brother's reputation."

The fact that the brothers' answers contradicted each other clearly indicated that they'd been unaware of this matter beforehand—and even if they had been aware, they hadn't colluded with each other. Emperor Hongzheng nodded with approval. "Jing Yu, could you tell us yourself what on earth this is all about?"

Fourth Prince Jing Yu took a step forward and knelt at the bottom of the marble steps. “Your son speaks only with great trepidation. The Eastern Isles offered a tribute of some fresh sea fish last year, and the best method of preparation was to thinly slice it and consume it raw. Your son thought it was truly delicious and had a second serving. Alas, the servants at the estate must have miscommunicated this somehow, causing these widespread rumors. Your son is at fault.”

Jing Yu had not been in the court for long, but as he was responsible for all matters related to foreign tributes, he had naturally come into possession of many exotic items from across the seas.

“The imperial family is an example for the nation, so naturally the people pay attention to your every move. How could you overindulge in something such as food?” Emperor Hongzheng felt somewhat aggravated. Those in the imperial family must avoid overindulgence in any particular thing. Obsession was forbidden.

“Fourth Brother is fortunate indeed to sample such delicacies. Your son has never even seen such exotic things.” First Prince Jing Rong said this with a sad smile, making the furrow between Emperor Hongzheng’s brows even deeper. The implications behind Jing Rong’s words were rather significant; tributes from foreign lands were not to be casually enjoyed by anyone save the emperor.

Jing Yu glared at the first prince, who seemed intent on stirring up trouble, and immediately kowtowed and explained, “Please forgive me, Father. Your son was, in fact, only able to acquire two fish from Mother. No gluttony took place!”

“Hmph!” Emperor Hongzheng snorted disdainfully. The way it appeared to him, these rumors circulating in the capital were purely due to the fourth prince flaunting his wealth. But as for the matter of the tribute itself, that was indeed worthy of a thorough investigation.

In the end, Emperor Hongzheng decreed that the Fourth Prince Jing Yu should be confined to his estate for a month to reflect on his mistakes. Even though it was not a severe punishment, it was enough to plant a negative impression in the emperor’s mind, and that was sufficient for Jing Shao.

The reason he’d spread the rumor in the first place was to divert rumors away from himself and to disgust Jing Yu and the empress consort while he was at it. He’d never predicted this result and was pleasantly surprised. He stole a sidelong glance at his expressionless brother, and it suddenly dawned on him that, perhaps even as they decided upon this topic for the rumor, his brother had already taken this into consideration.

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AFTER COURT WAS DISMISSED, the two brothers didn’t speak to each other at all, merely exchanging a look before going their separate ways. As Jing Shao reflected on how his brother was much more suitable for the throne than he was, his thoughts turned to heading home to tell his consort everything that happened today—along with performing some sort of private display of affection.

“Your Highness, are we heading directly back to the estate?” asked the coachman, pulling aside the carriage’s curtain.

Jing Shao considered it for a moment; he'd gotten up early this morning and all he'd eaten was a bowl of rice porridge and a pancake. "Let's go to The Flavor of Nostalgia for breakfast."

"Your Highness, The Flavor of Nostalgia isn't open in the morning," Yun Song reminded him.

"It's all right, just go." Jing Shao closed the curtain and leaned against the cushion to rest his eyes. Mu Hanzhang had arranged this cushion for him, as he'd predicted Jing Shao might get drowsy. At least this way, he could steal some shut-eye in the carriage.

While it was true that The Flavor of Nostalgia did not serve breakfast, the proprietor always arrived early to get the restaurant ready for lunch, as well as to prepare breakfast for his husband upon his return from morning court.

The name of the vice-minister of revenue was Xiao Yuan, courtesy name Hengzhi. Speaking of which, he and the second imperial consort's parents—Marquis Dingnan and the Xiao family—were of the same lineage, but they were very distant relatives. Xiao Yuan, being a person of integrity, had never attempted to rely on this family connection.

The Flavor of Nostalgia only had one door open, with a single attendant sweeping the floor out front. With his hands clasped behind his back, Jing Shao walked right in.

"Hengzhi, welcome back." Dressed in cyan, the large proprietor came out of the kitchen carrying a steaming basket of little dumplings. When he saw Jing Shao, he briefly froze, then smiled and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but The Flavor of Nostalgia isn't open for the day yet."

"Greetings, sir," said Jing Shao, smiling politely. "I'm a colleague of Xiao Yuan's, here to discuss something with him."

The Vice Minister's wife frowned, requested that Jing Shao take a seat, and handed over the basket of soup dumplings for him to eat. After that, he left, only to return with a savory, glutinous bowl of rice porridge.

Jing Shao bit into a soup dumpling. Its paper-thin skin melted in his mouth, the savory meat filling bursting with juices. The taste lingered on his tongue with just a single bite. "Sir, you're an incredible cook. I also took a man as my wife, but he's nowhere near as skilled as you."

"I'm not well-read, and all I know is cooking. Your wife is a man of sagely wisdom and can hardly be compared to someone as crude as I," the proprietor said, chuckling.

Jing Shao was startled to discover that this man actually knew who he was. He smiled immediately and said, "You are wise beyond compare, sir. How should I address you?" Gentlemen wives differed from lady wives in that ultimately, they were still men, so one could ask for their names directly without it being considered offensive.

"Your Highness is too kind. My name is Zhou Jin." Zhou Jin's friendly personality resonated well with Jing Shao, and he couldn't help chatting with him a bit longer.

Thus, by the time Xiao Yuan managed to return in his palanquin, what he saw was a certain prince he'd barely interacted with before, eating his soup dumplings,

drinking his restaurant's rice porridge, and chatting happily with his wife. He could feel the veins in his temples throbbing. "This one greets Your Highness Prince Cheng!"

Jing Shao laughed. "Lord Xiao, you're finally here. I just happened to be passing by, so I thought I'd come mooch a meal off you. These soup dumplings are delicious—Lord Xiao, you're a lucky man." Stuffing the very last soup dumpling inside his mouth, Jing Shao mumbled, "Mister Zhou, is there any more?"

"Of course." Zhou Jin smiled, then turned around to fetch more soup dumplings from the kitchen.

"Your Highness, what's your business here?" The young vice minister's usually pale face was flushed dark red with barely suppressed fury. Did this person understand etiquette at all? How dare he call his wife "Mister Zhou" in front of his husband?! They'd never even talked to each other before this, had they?!

"In fact, it's not anything important, really. It's just that I heard that you and your wife have a wonderful relationship." Jing Shao paused, then carefully looked around the restaurant before leaning right up to Xiao Yuan's ear, saying in a hushed tone, "This Prince merely wanted to ask you for some advice on how to make sure my gentleman wife no longer fears the affairs of the bedroom."

Xiao Yuan stopped short, taking one look at the rather sincere expression on Jing Shao's face before his glare softened into a smile. "Oh, so that's how it is. Then you've found the right person, Your Highness…" And so, the usually taciturn lord vice-minister suddenly became the ceremonials official from the Ministry of Rites and began to elucidate Jing Shao on the topic of "how to win over one's gentleman wife" at length.

When Zhou Jin brought out two more steamer baskets of dumplings, he found the two men whispering to each other with their heads bowed close together, occasionally chuckling. He shook his head in resignation and shot an indulgent glance at Xiao Yuan—so excited that his face was flushing to the tips of his ears—then returned to the kitchen to direct the staff to start prepping today's ingredients.

Sometimes, a friendship could form in the blink of an eye, and that was the case between Jing Shao and Xiao Yuan. By the time Jing Shao had finished breakfast and was on his way, the conversation between these two had already become—

"Hengzhi, can you ask Mister Zhou to take my Junqing out when he has time? I'm worried that he might get bored, being on his own."

"Absolutely, Your Highness, just leave it to me. Do you remember all those methods I shared with you?"

"Indeed, I do. If it all works out, I'll buy you a drink."

After Jing Shao left happily with all his questions answered, Xiao Yuan gleefully sauntered into the kitchen to see his wife.

"What were you talking about with Prince Cheng? Your face is all red." Zhou Jin pinched his husband's chin to hold him still so he could get a better look.

"Hmph!" Xiao Yuan shook off his hand and said furiously, "I should be the one asking you. What were you saying to him before I got back? Why was he still calling you Mister Zhou as he left?"

"Let me give you a kiss, and I'll tell you." Zhou Jin grabbed him and leaned in.

Xiao Yuan immediately pushed away his wife, who was a whole head taller than he was, and said in a huff, “If you don’t tell me the truth, I’ll make you wear pink clothes tomorrow!” Then he left the kitchen with a flutter of his sleeve.

“I don’t have anything in pink,” Zhou Jin said helplessly. Every time he pushed a little too hard, this man would demand he wear all sorts of brightly colored clothing, making it so that everyone in the capital thought the proprietor of The Flavor of Nostalgia had peculiar fashion taste.

“As soon as I’m done with work, I’ll go buy you some!” Xiao Yuan brushed that off with a wave and left for the Ministry of Revenue in a rather good mood.

“I didn’t even do anything last night…” Zhou Jin muttered, but his lips turned up in an impish grin. Since he’d have to wear pink anyway, he might as well make the most of it tonight.

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JING SHAO GOT BACK to the estate and began walking toward the east wing, his mind filled with the new methods learned from Xiao Yuan. Just as he reached the little study’s door, he heard Lady Song’s shrill voice: “These are the rules of the estate, and even the princely consort cannot break these precedents. Otherwise, everything here will fall into chaos.”

“It’s just a matter of arranging temporary accommodations in the side wing where the servants’ quarters are. As for their expenses, you can simply deduct it from my allowance.” Mu Hanzhang’s voice remained gentle, yet it bore a faint hint of anger.

“Your Highness certainly makes it sound easy—forgive this one for being blunt, but since Your Highness married into this household on the 8th of the Third Month, there was no allowance allocated for this month at all, so where is this one supposed to deduct these expenses from?” Song Lingxin’s demanding voice had a sharp edge to it, immediately raising Jing Shao’s hackles despite his earlier good mood.

Chapter 19:
Buffoon

"HOLD YOUR TONGUE!" Jing Shao burst into the room, his expression frosty.

Standing in the center of the room with a hand on her hip, Song Lingxin had just inhaled to continue harassing Mu Hanzhang, and she was forced to slowly breathe it out instead.

Mu Hanzhang sat behind the desk with a slight furrow between his brows. The sight of Jing Shao returning eased the grim set of his mouth a little, and he stood up to bow. "Welcome back, Your Highness."

Jing Shao strode over to Mu Hanzhang's side, then shot a look at Song Lingxin and the two handmaidens behind her. "Song Lingxin, is that any way to speak to the princely consort?"

"Your Highness!" Song Lingxin exclaimed woefully. She took a deep breath before saying, "This one is doing this for the sake of keeping peace in the estate. His Highness—"

"Be quiet!" The way Song Lingxin pitched her voice all squeaky in an attempt to be cute gave him a headache. Turning to the man next to him, he softened his tone. "Junqing, what's going on?"

Mu Hanzhang's eyes turned downcast, and he pursed his lips. "Nana is in poor health, and no one is there to care for her at the farm, so I wanted to bring her and her son to the servants' quarters and let them lodge there until her son's leg has healed up." His gentle, pleasant voice spoke at an unhurried pace, soothing to Jing Shao's ear.

"Your Highness, the estate does not allow outsiders. Those are the rules. Once His Highness sets this precedent, doesn't that mean anyone could introduce new servants into the estate whenever they wish?" Song Lingxin argued. From her perspective, the one thing the imperial family avoided at all costs was having spies from other families enter their estate. As long as this was the locus of her reasoning, she believed that Prince Cheng would take her side.

Jing Shao's brow furrowed.

As she realized that she must have been right, a sense of pride welled up in Song Lingxin's heart. "This one is in charge of all matters big and small within the harem and must take responsibility for anything that happens inside of it. The servants' quarters are a part of the west wing, and should any questionable characters be allowed within, this one would hate if something untoward occurred."

The west wing was where the concubines and womenfolk resided, so what Lady Song was implying by "something untoward"… Mu Hanzhang's hand clenched into a fist. Her words were a blatant insult toward him.

A loud *smack* cut through the silence. Before Mu Hanzhang even had a chance to speak, Jing Shao had already struck Song Lingxin across the face.

Lady Song's eyes widened in disbelief as she stared at Jing Shao.

“Since you can’t manage the harem properly, hand over all of the ledgers to the princely consort today,” Jing Shao said coldly.

“Your Highness!” Song Lingxin put a hand to her cheek. She couldn’t understand why she’d suddenly been violently reprimanded and even stripped of her right as the mistress of the house when she was clearly in the right. Her voice rose into what was practically a scream. “This one was acting in the best interests of the estate! How could you treat me this way?! His Highness simply cannot manage the estate properly! The dates were clearly set in the peony booklet, but for the nine days that this one had bedchamber duty, Your Highness didn’t come for even a single day! With someone like that managing the household, who’d listen to him?!”

“That’s enough! Starting today, Madam Song is confined to her quarters for a month!” Jing Shao rubbed his throbbing temple, turned toward Madam Song—who was still struggling and screaming despite her handmaidens’ urging—and dismissed them all with a wave. “Take her away! Without This Prince’s permission, she is not to take a single step outside of her courtyard.”

The guard outside came in, and the two handmaidens kept pleading with Song Lingxin as they pulled her away, half dragging her out of the room.

As the room finally quieted down, Jing Shao heaved a sigh. He picked up Mu Hanzhang’s half-finished tea from the table and gulped down a big mouthful.

“I panicked a bit this morning when I received the news, and I didn’t think things through.” Too late to stop Jing Shao from drinking from his cup, Mu Hanzhang chose instead not to bring it up at all.

When it came to moving his wet nurse to the estate, he was indeed at fault for not giving the matter enough consideration.

“You are the princely consort of this estate. What you say must not be challenged by anyone.” Jing Shao smiled and gently pulled him close. “I didn’t go to the west wing these past few days—Song Lingxin is just taking any excuse to throw a fit.”

Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together. “I could bring Nana to the farm that came with my dowry…”

“No need,” Jing Shao said, stroking Mu Hanzhang’s soft, silky long hair. “Just bring them here to the estate. If you want them to stay permanently, go discuss it with the Beiwei Estate and count them as a part of your dowry.” Alongside property, attendants also could be included as a part of one’s dowry; Jing Shao knew that Junqing brought few attendants to begin with, so since his wet nurse’s family were people he could trust, it would be a good idea to keep them in the estate to serve him.

Mu Hanzhang gazed at him steadily and slowly moved in closer to settle his chin on Jing Shao’s shoulder. “Thank you, Li’l Spoon.” A husband’s support was of utmost importance to a wife’s standing in the estate as well as their management of the harem; Jing Shao had made it clear that he was on his side, perhaps even obviously biased toward him, and no one knew better than Mu Hanzhang how rare such treatment was in a noble house.

Jing Shao was overjoyed with Mu Hanzhang’s unprompted intimacy; he felt his shoulder tingle where they touched and couldn’t help but hug him tight. “You fool, we’re partners, so what are you thanking me for? If you really want to thank me, then let me kiss you.” What had started off as heartfelt had gradually devolved in decency the longer he spoke.

Mu Hanzhang gently pushed him away. “Your Highness himself just said that there was no need for thanks.” This said, he went to fetch the ledgers, completely ignoring Jing Shao, who was left to stare blankly after him.

Princely Consort Cheng really was getting cheekier by the day!

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AT HIGH NOON, after he’d eaten lunch at home, Jing Shao wandered over to the Ministry of War where he served in an acting capacity.

After their return from repelling the Xiongnu, his brothers-in-arms had all been appointed to positions in the Six Ministries, so Emperor Hongzheng had assigned Jing Shao to the Ministry of War, which he preferred. The first prince Jing Rong was in the Ministry of Works overseeing various construction projects, his brother Jing Chen was in the Ministry of Rites organizing all kinds of major ceremonies and banquets, and the Fourth Prince Jing Yu was in the Court of State Ceremonial, in charge of all things related to foreign tributes—these were all posts where one could accomplish something concrete and gain recognition.

While he held a position at the Ministry of War, he didn’t actually hold any real power. He was merely posted there like a plaque on the wall, as those at the Ministry of War did not appreciate having a prince telling them what to do. In his past life, he’d also hated having to do paperwork, so he used to come by once a day, take care of a couple of things, then leave.

“Your Highness!” The minister of war had noticed that their figurehead had arrived, and he’d rushed over to greet him with a smile.

“Lord Sun, just go about your business. This Prince has just come to show his face, that’s all,” Jing Shao said, waving him off and walking to his seat, picking up a few documents to read at random.

Minister Sun was accustomed to his attitude, so after exchanging some pleasantries, he went off to attend to his own business.

Even though Jing Shao had been gone for a while, there weren’t that many documents piled up on his desk. Anything of urgency sent here had already been handled by Minister Sun, leaving only some low-priority matters for Jing Shao, who hadn’t been in the Ministry of War for very long. While he’d been away, Minister Sun had annotated most of them for him.

He plucked a booklet from the desk. It was the Ministry of War’s draft budget of military provisions for the year, where approximate rations and salary for their various stationed troops had already been calculated. There were also two memorials: one requesting for the reduction of military personnel, believing that since the Xiongnu had already been defeated, they wouldn’t need as many soldiers in the coming years; the other reporting on an incursion of barbarians near the Xinan territory of Miao in the southwest and requesting that the government send troops to suppress them.

The first one could wait, but this second one looked rather urgent. Since it was on his desk in particular, someone must have wanted him to decide what to do about it as soon as possible.

“Your Highness, this memorial only got here today. The situation seems to have gotten even more dire than it was at the beginning of the month,” said the vice-minister of war, Song An, sidling up to him.

Jing Shao nodded slightly and began to flip through the military salary ledger.

“From what this one has heard, these barbarians they speak of are nothing but roving bandits. They’re only gaining ground because the Yunnan-Tibet Governor is incompetent.” Song An stepped closer and whispered, “Your Highness can request to lead troops to eliminate these bandits—this is a good opportunity to gain some recognition with little effort.”

Jing Shao looked up at him with furrowed brows. Song An was Song Lingxin’s father, and out of everyone in the Ministry of War, he had the closest relationship to Jing Shao. This had happened in his last life as well; when he’d received the first memorial a month earlier, this man had advised him to march there with an army. He hadn’t been in a good place back then and had left on a campaign on the fourth day after his wedding, leaving the recently married and still ill Mu Hanzhang all alone in the estate.

In hindsight, Song An hadn’t advised him to go to war purely for the sake of Jing Shao earning military merit, but more likely so that he’d neglect his consort, thereby securing his daughter’s position as the matriarch of the household.

“The Yunnan-Tibet Governor is hardly a freeloader. There’s no such thing as easy military distinction in the world.” Jing Shao let out a dry chuckle, clearly not intending to elaborate on this topic any further.

This expedition to Yunnan-Tibet might have appeared an easy assignment at first glance, but it wasn’t. Xinan’s environment was complex, and it took a long time for soldiers of the Central Plains to habituate themselves to it. When he’d led his troops there years ago, he’d suffered significant setbacks as soon as he’d arrived, fighting miasma and venomous insects, and even nearly dying himself. Those so-called small bands of roving bandits took him three full years to clear out. Not only had he been rebuked by Father, he’d even missed his best chance to mobilize against the three feudatories. The whole escapade had truly been a thankless effort.

Song An smiled sheepishly. “I heard Lingxin made Your Highness angry today. I’ve spoiled this daughter of mine rotten. Please don’t hold it against her, Your Highness.”

“Hmph!” Jing Shao slammed the ledger onto the table. The loud thud drew curious glances from everyone nearby, before they quickly averted their eyes. “Lord Song, what need is there to bring up a trivial matter of the harem here?” Song Lingxin’s tongue sure was loose; what happened this morning had already made it to her parents’ home, and it was only afternoon. The thought of this made him begin to feel quite weary.

Noticing Jing Shao’s impatience, Song An smiled in appeasement and said a few more meaningless things before slinking away.

The long-winded Song An absent, Jing Shao picked up the memorial again. This time around, he was absolutely not going to take on this arduous task. He’d much rather spend this time at home keeping his wife company—such a wonderful opportunity ought to be granted to first brother, or perhaps fourth brother.

He spent the rest of the afternoon slacking away at the Ministry of War, before leaving early according to his usual custom to avoid attracting attention. First, he

strolled to the south side of the city on foot to buy some marinated snacks, then to the alley to fetch a bottle of plum wine, and at last returned to the estate just in time for dinner.

"Where is the princely consort?" he asked. Upon his return to his living quarters in the east wing, the dinner table was already laden with food, yet Mu Hanzhang was nowhere to be seen.

"To answer Your Highness, His Highness is still working in the small study. Mengxi has already gone to ask him to come for dinner," Zhixi answered while helping Jing Shao change his clothes.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Your Highness. This one apologizes for his lateness," Mu Hanzhang said somewhat regretfully the moment he arrived.

Jing Shao's brows twitched, and then he held Mu Hanzhang still by the chin and pecked him on the lips. "Let's eat."

Frozen, Mu Hanzhang stood there until he remembered that this was once again his "punishment" for speaking politely. But the room was still full of servants—this man seemed not to have considered that at all! His face quickly colored, and he waved to dismiss the handmaidens at once.

"What kept you so busy?" Jing Shao pushed the marinated dishes he'd bought in front of Mu Hanzhang for him to taste, while he poured each of them a glass of plum wine.

Using his chopsticks, Mu Hanzhang picked up a marinated chicken wing and took a bite. "I took over the harem's affairs so suddenly; it's inevitable that things would be hectic for a little while." Even though he'd put it that way, his tone was quite confident. Jing Shao could tell he was perfectly capable of handling the matter and so had no intention of getting involved.

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AFTER DINNER, Mu Hanzhang nudged at Jing Shao, who had climbed onto the bed again. "You better head to the west wing tonight. You heard what Madam Song said. If you keep sleeping in the east wing, it's likely to stir up trouble in the harem."

Jing Shao reluctantly sat up. He then pulled down this consort of his that wouldn't stop trying to nag him into someone else's bed before swiftly pinning him beneath him. "I drank too much tonight, and I don't have the strength to move to another bed." After saying this, he sprawled over Mu Hanzhang's chest and lay still.

Mu Hanzhang rolled his eyes. Was he claiming that someone who could chug a whole pint of baijiu would get drunk from a tiny bottle of plum wine as weak as water? He should at least have made up a plausible excuse!

Chapter 20:
Misunderstanding

"IF WE'RE GOING TO SLEEP, we should at least take off our clothes." Mu Hanzhang prodded the man on top of him in defeat.

"Let me take them off for you." Jing Shao, who had been quite limp and pliant only moments before, perked up at once. He sat up and started undoing the ties on Mu Hanzhang's robes.

"I'll…I'll do it on my own," said Mu Hanzhang as he hastily grabbed the hand pulling at the sash at his waist.

Jing Shao smiled at his words, let down the bed veil, and sat at his side staring directly at him.

Mu Hanzhang's face grew even redder. He quickly took off his outer and inner robes before slipping under the covers in nothing but his underrobe. Jing Shao found it rather amusing, and he followed suit before getting under the covers and pulling Mu Hanzhang close to him, kissing him on the forehead.

Xiao Yuan had told him that one must treat one's gentleman wife gently in bed and respect him; kissing was more effective at this than random touches, as that should make him feel cherished. Jing Shao kissed him softly from his forehead to the furrow of his brow, traveling to that slightly cool tip of his nose, until he landed on those soft lips. The man in his arms kept his eyes closed as if nervous, yet he didn't resist.

Thinking to himself that it seemed to really be working, Jing Shao pulled down the lapel of his consort's snow-white underrobe. Beyond the bed, the lamps hadn't yet been put out for the night, and their glow through the bed veil illuminated the delicate curve of Junqing's throat and his exquisitely shaped collarbones. He resisted the urge to caress them directly; instead, he propped himself up on his elbows and, bending over, kissed along Mu Hanzhang's jaw, running his tongue over that pale neck. The adorable jut of his throat bobbed once. Jing Shao's lips curled into a smile, and he kept going.

Mu Hanzhang's fair chest seemed a bit lean, but not as frail as Jing Shao had imagined. Instead, there was a layer of beautiful, smoothly defined muscles, and two little flat pink nipples. *So beautiful. I want to touch them so much!* Jing Shao swallowed, then inched closer to take one tender pink bud into his mouth.

Mu Hanzhang bit his lower lip, a moan escaping his throat as a tingling sensation that made him tremble suddenly spread through his entire body. He wanted to push the man on top of him away but felt such a tenderness in his gentle touch that all he could do was clutch at the sheets beneath him, telling himself to endure for a little while longer, to satisfy Jing Shao a little more. He allowed that unbearable pleasure to wash over him, again and again, like waves upon the shore.

Sensing how the man beneath him was trying to indulge him, Jing Shao couldn't help getting even more excited and began to nibble at the protrusion between his lips.

“Ah…” Mu Hanzhang cried out, before the sound transformed into a moan. A tremor ran through his body as the intense sensation forced him to arch his back.

Now that he’d gotten a reaction, Jing Shao couldn’t help but start to get carried away. His hand reached searchingly downward until he was smoothing his palm over rounded curves through a layer of snowy satin.

His mind sobering in a flash, Mu Hanzhang’s moan cut into a “Don’t,” and he flinched away. His eyes opened in terror to look at Jing Shao, who met his gaze, frozen.

The two of them stared at each other for a moment. Mu Hanzhang, who had already sat up halfway, hung his head with mild embarrassment. Jing Shao, interrupted unexpectedly, was no longer in the mood to continue. He cursed silently at his own impatience. Heaving a sigh, he turned over to face the wall, feeling frustrated with himself.

Seeing that he was angry, Mu Hanzhang slowly tightened his grip on the quilt in his hand, then loosened it, only to grab it again to pull it over Jing Shao. He lay down silently and stared blankly at the canopy of their bed. Based on the way Jing Shao had responded, he must have disappointed him again…

After spending the whole night lost in thought, Mu Hanzhang didn’t manage to fall asleep until the sun of dawn touched the sky.

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THE NEXT DAY, as Jing Shao predicted, the memorial regarding the barbarian incursion was brought to morning court by the minister of war.

“Jing Shao, how do you feel about the combat strength of the Southern Barbarians?” Emperor Hongzheng had already read this memorial yesterday. The reason he was asking for Jing Shao’s opinion first was because the vice-minister of war, Song An, had annotated in a recommendation that Prince Cheng, who had recently returned victorious from combat, should be the one to lead the troops on this campaign.

“Your son believes that even though the Southern Barbarians are merely simple peasants, since they are capable of matching the Yunnan-Tibet Governor, they must have qualities that make them extraordinary and ought not to be underestimated.” Jing Shao spoke his honest thoughts, presenting the fact that this assignment wasn’t easy, with an added hint that it would be an opportunity to distinguish oneself in battle.

Emperor Hongzheng’s brow creased, his expression neutral. “What are your thoughts, our esteemed ministers?”

After a brief moment, many stepped forward to offer their suggestions.

One minister said that the Southern Territories were a wasteland, and the mountains those rebel groups had occupied were in no way prosperous, so ignoring them was an option. Another immediately refuted him and demanded to know if this was allowed to continue, where, then, lay the might of the state? Or the majesty of their emperor? Troops must be sent to suppress these rebels.

A third minister stated that the environment of the Yunnan-Tibet area was complex, and the people living there were ignorant and naive. A courageous and resourceful general must be sent on this campaign, for not only did they have to suppress this rebellion, they also must reassure and calm the populace.

For a while, the court was as chaotic as a busy market. Aside from Emperor Hongzheng, who merely listened, the only others who didn't speak up were the three princes standing in the foremost positions. Jing Shao shot a glance at Jing Chen and the first prince next to him and only then remembered that the fourth prince was under house arrest. If the fourth prince was smart enough, he'd volunteer to lead this campaign, and if he was too smart for his own good…

Jing Shao's gaze drifted toward the first prince, who seemed hesitant to speak, and a cold glint flashed through his downcast eyes. Well then, it all depended on which one of these two had the worst luck.

Ultimately, Emperor Hongzheng halted the argument with a shout and concluded, "The Southern Territories, though desolate, are still a part of the Chen Empire. We will not allow even an inch of this empire the founding emperor fought for to fall into anyone's hands!"

"Long live Your Majesty's wisdom!" The emperor's subjects all dropped to their knees.

"As for the selection of our marshal and the number of troops, the Ministry of War will come up with a plan. We will discuss this matter further at tomorrow's morning court! Court dismissed!" With a wave of his sleeve, Emperor Hongzheng turned and left.

Jing Shao made eye contact with Jing Chen, and they exchanged knowing smiles.

When he'd woken up this morning and seen that his consort was still sound asleep, he'd quietly climbed over him to dress, then left for court. Waking up too late to take any time to eat properly, Jing Shao had brought a couple of meat-filled flatbreads along, and while he was sitting in the carriage on the way to court, happily munching away, Jing Chen had suddenly climbed in. He'd informed Jing Shao that the previous day, as he was handing over a memorial at the Ministry of War, Minister Sun had discovered a proposal written by Song An that proposed Prince Cheng be the leader of the expedition.

As he'd silently cursed out Song An for making unilateral decisions, he'd also had to marvel at how well-connected his brother was. So, after discussing the issue with Jing Chen, Jing Shao had decided to act overly eager for the position. This would imply that he had colluded with his father-in-law to receive this assignment and make his father feel averse to the idea. In this way, he could avoid having to lead the campaign.

After court, the two brothers continued to ignore each other in public. As soon as they left the palace, they went their separate ways.

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"HENGZHI, what you taught me actually worked!" Jing Shao, who had once again gone to The Flavor of Nostalgia to claim an unfairly free breakfast, happily gave Xiao Yuan a hearty pat on the back the moment he saw him. Even though Mu Hanzhang and he had only made it halfway last night, it was still a step forward.

Unfortunately, poor Vice Minister Xiao was merely a scholar, and one hard pat on the back from a master martial artist almost made him spit up blood. Outwardly, he managed to respond with a bold laugh. "Well, of course! I knew it would work." And then, he ate soup dumplings while boasting to Jing Shao how he'd conquered his imposing and powerful wife into submitting beneath him with his gentle seduction.

Zhou Jin, wearing a pale pink shirt, stood by the back door and let out a helpless sigh. He gestured for the attendant to bring them their rice porridge. He had pushed for too much and gone too hard the night before, so he was avoiding his angry husband at the moment until he cooled down. Besides, this outfit was too embarrassing—it would be best if he simply avoided seeing outsiders today.

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WHEN HE WOKE UP this morning and found the spot next to him already cold, Mu Hanzhang realized with a start that he'd overslept and had failed to attend to his husband's morning routine. He couldn't help but feel a bit upset. Wouldn't that make him even angrier?

Jing Shao went out and stayed out all day. He didn't even come back for lunch.

Once Mu Hanzhang had finished dealing with several urgent matters, he began to let his mind wander, the ledger held uselessly in his hands. He couldn't focus on the numbers no matter how hard he tried. It wasn't until Yun Zhu came to let him know that his nanny's family had moved in that he shook his daze off and hurried over.

The servants' quarters were in a long building and in several small courtyards between the east and west wings, in front of the rear gates. Duofu had specifically arranged for three rooms in a small courtyard house for the princely consort's wet nurse and her family. Nana Zhou was tidying up the house with a smile on her face, and when she saw the splendidly dressed, stately figure of Mu Hanzhang, she couldn't stop herself from tearing up.

They chatted for a while, catching up, and then Nana Zhou grabbed Mu Hanzhang's hand, studying his face carefully. "Young master, you didn't sleep well last night."

Mu Hanzhang responded with a noncommittal hum.

"Could it be that His Highness…" Nana Zhou looked anxiously at the young master she had cared for since he was a child. She was getting on in years, so she was naturally wise in the ways of the world. Intimacy between men often meant that the one on the receiving end ended up enduring a lot more. Noting his pale complexion, she assumed he must have suffered the night before, and it made her heart ache so

much that it brought her to the verge of tears again.

"It's not his fault." When he realized that Nana Zhou had misunderstood, he immediately tried to explain. "His Highness treats me very well." He wasn't sure exactly why, but he really didn't want those close to him to misunderstand Jing Shao.

But his wet nurse refused to believe him, and Mu Hanzhang could only sigh. "It's my fault…I made him angry."

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JING SHAO HADN'T been intending to stay out all day; he'd initially planned to completely skip his honorary Ministry of War job and to just go home for lunch and a nap. But alas, just as he finished his freeloaded breakfast, he was stopped by a guard sent from the villa. Apparently, Ren Feng had an urgent matter they needed to discuss.

Ren Feng had originally been part of the criminal underground, and he had a good reputation on the streets. However, with an elderly mother at home and a vigilante job that didn't exactly provide stable income, he decided to wash his hands of the business and work for Jing Shao. That way, he could make steady money to support his mother, and eventually marry and settle down. In a world of carnage and chaos like the underground, it was extremely difficult to make decent money. So, Ren Feng only had to spread word there that Prince Cheng was hiring, and crowds of people immediately showed up, offering their services. The reason Ren Feng was in such a hurry to see Jing Shao today was because a rather famous figure in the martial world had appeared on his list of applicants.

By the time Jing Shao finished taking care of business at the villa and returned home, it was already dinnertime, and his consort was sitting at the dining table, staring off into space.

Today, Mu Hanzhang's wet nurse had reminded him that Prince Cheng was, after all, an ordinary man, and on top of that, in the prime of his youth. No matter how much he cherished his wife, he couldn't possibly endure repeated rejection. Even if he didn't like those concubines in the west wing, there were plenty of people in the capital ready and willing to climb into his bed. Eventually, inevitably, he would fall for someone else…

The thought of Jing Shao smiling gently at another caused Mu Hanzhang an unbearable pain in his heart, so much so that he was immersed in his own thoughts and didn't even notice Jing Shao's approach.

Chapter 21:
Opportunity

FINDING THE RARE SIGHT of his consort lost in a daydream rather amusing, Jing Shao sidled over to him unnoticed and pecked those lightly pursed lips.

"Ah!" Mu Hanzhang started, taken completely off guard, but when he realized it was Jing Shao, he couldn't help glaring at him. "What are you doing, Your Highness?"

"It's rare to see you so distracted," Jing Shao said, chuckling as he sat down next to him. Once Zhixi had ladled out bowls of soup and rice for them both, she left the room.

Mu Hanzhang silently picked up the soup bowl and took a sip, finding it particularly savory tonight.

"Junqing, do you want to learn how to use concealed weapons?" Jing Shao ate a few bites, then, noticing that Mu Hanzhang was only drinking soup, put a slice of fish onto his rice bowl.

"Concealed weapons?" Mu Hanzhang turned to him, perplexed. "Why is this on your mind all of a sudden?"

"There's a vigilante in the underground known for his skillful use of concealed weapons, and people call him Nine-Blade Ghost." Jing Shao chuckled as he recalled that man's appearance—he did look rather like a ghost. "He came offering his services at the villa today."

Though Mu Hanzhang had never heard of this Nine-Blade Ghost, if he was a famous vigilante in the criminal underground, why would he join a prince's ranks? Weren't all those people trying to avoid the government?

Jing Shao smiled, and noticing Mu Hanzhang's enjoyment of the soup, ladled him another bowl. "You can't make much money in the criminal underground these days. If these vigilantes don't want to kill or steal, it's pretty hard to make ends meet."

Legend had it that, hundreds of years ago, the martial arts world was successful and flourishing, and the leader of the martial arts alliance had even been powerful enough to oppose the imperial court. However, these peerless ancient martial arts and their practitioners had long since been lost to time, and these days, the so-called masters of the martial world were only a little better than the first-rank Imperial Palace Guards. Moreover, most skillful martial artists participated in the Imperial Military Exam regardless, so there really weren't many true experts who were unaffiliated with the military left.

However, some extraordinary individuals still existed, such as Nine-Blade Ghost who specialized in concealed weapons.

Mu Hanzhang considered it but eventually shook his head. "Concealed weapons must be practiced starting from a young age. And besides, I can't cultivate an inner force. No matter how well I learn, their power would be greatly diminished."

Jing Shao nodded, but internally he was thinking about asking Nine-Blade Ghost to create some concealed weapons that could be used without inner force so that Junqing could use them for self-defense.

Once their meal concluded, the two of them took to the daybed to drink tea and chat. Suddenly, Mu Hanzhang's teacup fell from his hand, clattering to the floor.

"Junqing?" Jing Shao set down his own cup and took Mu Hanzhang's hand, which wouldn't stop trembling. "What's the matter?"

"I…" His words trailed off into a groan, his face flushing. Abruptly, he stood up, but his knees buckled, and he nearly collapsed. Jing Shao quickly pulled him into his arms.

Mu Hanzhang's breathing began to quicken, and sweat beaded on his temples. Panicked, Jing Shao yelled through the door, "Duofu, go get me an imperial physician!"

"There's no…there's no need…" Mu Hanzhang leaned against him, biting the tip of his tongue to keep calm. "It's…an aphrodisiac!"

"What?" Shock filled Jing Shao's head with white noise. How had someone managed to drug Junqing?!

Duofu happened to overhear these words while entering the room and frantically dropped to his knees. "Your Highness! I…I…"

"This Prince wants an investigation! Find out what happened within two hours!" Jing Shao bellowed, and picking up the man in his arms, he headed toward the inner chamber.

Duofu wiped the sweat from his brow, then left to gather the guards.

Once Jing Shao had confirmed that aside from a fever-like heat radiating from Mu Hanzhang's body, he had no other symptoms of poisoning, he stripped away the other man's outer robes and settled him in bed.

"I'm fine…" Mu Hanzhang gasped, biting his lower lip to visibly restrain himself, one hand tightly clutching a pillow. He looked pleadingly at Jing Shao. "Li'l Spoon, could you…please leave for a little while…" Once again, his voice trailed off into a moan.

Watching his beloved wife trembling on the bed, breathing heavily, his face red with a feverish sheen, Jing Shao felt a tightness low in his belly and couldn't resist pouncing on him. "Junqing, don't be afraid. Once I help you work through the drug, you'll feel much better."

"I…" Mu Hanzhang's complaints turned into another groan, and he glared at Jing Shao instead. He had been hit with an aphrodisiac, not some sort of muscle relaxant; he even felt rather invigorated. Why would he need anyone's help?

Jing Shao smiled. Now that his concerns had been alleviated, he had a feeling he knew how this had happened. Despite his irritation at the culprit, he couldn't help feeling like this might just be a good opportunity…

Reaching out to that hand grasping the pillow, Jing Shao tangled those soft, slender fingers with his own. He leaned down to pull the shell of one reddened ear between his teeth, and his other hand made short work of the sash holding Mu Hanzhang's inner robes closed. Placing a cool hand against that blushing chest, he pressed down on one erect bud and kneaded with just the right amount of force.

“Ah…don’t…” With how sensitive Mu Hanzhang’s body was right now, how was he supposed to endure such treatment?

“Junqing, don’t be afraid. I won’t go all the way. Trust me.” Jing Shao spoke soothingly by his ear in a husky voice, then reached over to stroke his head, looking gently and earnestly into his eyes.

Mu Hanzhang stared back, mesmerized, and recalled his nanny’s words from earlier in the day; such an exceptionally privileged and talented man had endured time and time again for his sake. If he didn’t want this gentle gaze to turn to someone else, then he needed to do something… It wasn’t as though he felt nothing for the man…

Once he’d acknowledged this, a sudden clarity took over. Mu Hanzhang slowly let his jaw relax, freeing his lower lip, and he nodded slightly.

Freed to do as he wished, Jing Shao sucked gently on that bitten lower lip; one hand comforting that pitiful little bud, his other gradually reaching lower, and through a layer of snowy, smooth satin, he wrapped his hand gently around Junqing’s straining cock, invigorated by the drug.

Mu Hanzhang hummed low in his throat, and his head tilted back in response to the intense sensations. Taking advantage of the situation, Jing Shao closed his mouth over the bobbing jut of his throat, and began to more firmly stroke his dick.

Hands tightly clutching Jing Shao’s shoulders, Mu Hanzhang slowly closed his eyes, so overstimulated that a single teardrop fell from the corner of his eye.

Thankfully, the drug was only meant to cause arousal and had no other effect. Once Junqing found completion, the effects of the drug almost immediately dissipated.

Jing Shao pressed a kiss to Mu Hanzhang’s forehead, slick with sweat, and settled him back into the pillows. He then passionately made out with him for a while before taking a deep breath and sitting up.

“Li’l Spoon, you…” Mu Hanzhang opened his eyes, and grabbed Jing Shao just as he tried to leave. Earlier, he had clearly felt this man also becoming aroused.

“I’m going to head over to the bathroom.” Jing Shao was intending to resolve his issue in the bathtub.

“Let me…let me help you…” Mu Hanzhang pursed his lips, and his handsome face began to flush all over again.

“Junqing…” Jing Shao looked at him, surprised and pleased.

Before the other man could change his mind, he quickly undressed and then guided Junqing’s supple, slender hand down to his cock. Cupping the face of the man beneath him which was shyly turned away, he pressed his lips against the tender petals of Junqing’s mouth again.

Under a red canopy of heated silk, they lost track of time altogether.

Chapter 22:
Farce

AFTER ALMOST TWO HOURS, Jing Shao held his helplessly panting consort close and lay back on the bed, satisfied and gently stroking his glossy long hair.

Mu Hanzhang buried his face in his husband's broad chest and then shot him a lazy glare. This man had taken advantage of his distraction and performed a sneak attack, making him come together with him again even though he'd already done it earlier. Right now, he felt completely drained of strength and so exhausted that he didn't want to move at all.

Jing Shao joyfully carried his wife to the tub where they bathed together, then he pulled on some clothes and headed for the door. "Go ahead and get some sleep, if you're tired. I'm going to go sort this out."

"I'll go with you." Mu Hanzhang put on a set of outer robes. This matter was related to the harem, so it was his responsibility to see to it.

The outer chamber was filled with people, and in the center knelt a disheveled woman, crying and making a scene. When Duofu saw Jing Shao approach, he secretly breathed a sigh of relief.

"Your Highness! Your Highness! It wasn't me, it really wasn't!" The woman threw herself at Jing Shao's feet, clutching at his robe. It turned out to be Concubine Li!

"My investigation revealed the drug was added to the soup, and it was a mood-boosting, performance-enhancing aphrodisiac for men. According to the peony booklet, Concubine Li is the one on bedchamber duties tonight," Duofu reported.

The soup had made it from the kitchen to the dining table without any issues, so then the drug must have been added after it was placed on the table. The only people who could have done it were the handmaidens who attended closely to their masters in the east wing living quarters.

THE HANDMAIDENS WHO SERVED at his side being willing to betray him like this was far more serious than just a concubine's petty tricks to compete for favor!

Jing Shao coldly eyed Lady Li as she prostrated herself on the floor. Since he'd taken a man as his primary wife, it meant that the first son born to his concubines would become the eldest common-born son. Even though this son could not inherit his title, he could inherit most of his property. It was no wonder, then, that the concubines were growing impatient. However, they seemed to have forgotten that the aphrodisiac they'd chosen not only worked on the prince, but worked just as well on the male princely consort… A fact that secretly quite appealed to him.

"Duofu, according to this household's rules, how should this be handled?" Mu Hanzhang sat down next to Jing Shao, musing over how extremely bold the concubines here were; such incidents were rarely even encountered in the Marquis Beiwei Estate.

“To answer Your Highness, concubines who use an aphrodisiac without His Highness’s explicit knowledge are to be beaten to death by club,” Duofu explained, his face scrunched up unhappily. This rule had actually been set by Madam Song; originally, the punishment had been to send the erring concubine to a Buddhist nunnery.

Hearing the punishment, Lady Li started to scream, “Your Highness, it really wasn’t me! I’ve served Your Highness for five years, and I’ve never done anything like this!”

Jing Shao furrowed his brow with impatience at Lady Li’s incessant crying, then waved a hand. “Drag her out.”

“Wait a moment.” Mu Hanzhang stopped the guards and slowly approached her. Without looking at the woman kneeling on the floor, he swept his gaze coldly over the other servants. “Lady Li has been with His Highness for many years, and her connections within the household must be extensive. As far as this one knows, among those who work in the east wing, more than half are on good terms with Lady Li.”

Clearly, Mu Hanzhang thought that she must have had an accomplice. It was the first time he’d ever spoken so formally to the servants; his gentle, pleasant voice was still languid and relaxed from afterglow, yet it somehow still sent a chill down their spines.

Duofu had gathered everyone in the estate for the investigation. Practically all the handmaidens of the east wing were present, and at this implied accusation, they all dropped to their knees, not daring to speak a word. Those unfamiliar with Concubine Li were privately relieved, while those who were on good terms with her grew anxious, and the remainder who had accepted favors sweated profusely.

Lady Li hadn’t known how seriously this would be taken, and the prince wasn’t at all moved by her many years of loyal service. Terrified and trembling, she kowtowed. “I’m sorry, I know I was wrong! I was foolishly blinded by greed! But Madam Song was the one who came up with it! Please, Your Highness, please spare my life!”

Lady Li had only just realized that Madam Song had devised this plan to kill two birds with one stone—if she succeeded, then everyone in the estate would know that Prince Cheng and his consort weren’t performing marital duties, and if she failed, then she’d eliminate a different member of the competition. Why had she thoughtlessly listened to Madam Song’s advice?!

“That treacherous snake!” Jing Shao sniffed contemptuously and hurled the cup in his hand to the ground, right at Concubine Li’s feet. “Bring Song Lingxin here!”

Duofu quickly sent two handmaidens to the west wing to summon Madam Song, who was still confined to her quarters.

“Even if the idea came from Madam Song, the only one who could have drugged the soup is you, Concubine Li.” Mu Hanzhang continued his investigation; there were clearly significant issues within the Prince Cheng Estate’s harem that needed to be solved. If they were capable of spiking his food today, they could easily poison it tomorrow. Jing Shao had entrusted him with the management of the harem, so he had to provide him with a safe and secure home!

Lady Li wanted to argue, but as she met Mu Hanzhang’s eyes, which seemed to see right through her, her lips parted, yet she couldn’t think of anything to say.

Instinctively, she knew that not revealing the truth would only make things worse for her, but coming clean would lead to her demise regardless.

"If you can tell us how this poison got into His Highness's soup, your life will be spared." Turning back around, Mu Hanzhang took a seat next to Jing Shao. Concubine Li looked up at the two sitting in the principal seat with hesitation in her eyes. It was clear she didn't believe his words, so Mu Hanzhang turned to Jing Shao for confirmation.

The other man returned his look with a smile. "In matters of the harem, you may do as you see fit."

Soothed by these words, Concubine Li stretched out a trembling hand and pointed at one person in the crowd—Mengxi.

"Your Highness, it wasn't me! I'm innocent! I'm not even responsible for serving meals!" The earlier conversation had already left Mengxi coated in a cold sweat, and now that she'd been exposed, she felt weak and faint. She staggered forward onto her knees to explain.

Handmaiden duties in the east wing had been reassigned on the day after Mu Hanzhang married into the estate; Mengxi was responsible for tea and water, and Miaoxi for lighting and bedding, while Zhixi was responsible for serving the food, and Lanting and Lanxuan oversaw cleaning and laundry. All this was said to try and implicate Zhixi as the culprit.

Zhixi had been remaining quiet out of consideration; she held loyalty toward her coworkers and didn't want to make things unnecessarily worse for Mengxi by calling her out. But Mengxi's attitude displayed disregard for this same bond, so Zhixi no longer felt the need to protect her.

She crawled forward on her knees, kowtowed to Mu Hanzhang, and said, "This is all due to my negligence. Miaoxi was feeling unwell today. After I set out the food, since Your Highness was still in the little study, I asked Mengxi to go get Your Highness, but she said Your Highness disliked her. Without thinking it over, I let Mengxi remain in the room to watch over the food while I went to the study. As this was my oversight, I ask to be punished for my mistake, Your Highness."

Mengxi immediately screamed and cursed Zhixi for her lies and slander. Zhixi remained impassive, and she did not respond.

Mengxi was a gossip, and she was also known to be the one passing information to the west wing. Since nothing as bad as this had ever happened before, there had never been anything done about her. Mu Hanzhang lowered his eyes. All of the most important details of the case had been solved, while the origins of the drug could be investigated later. He picked up his teacup from the table and casually took a sip, before calmly saying, "Drag Mengxi outside, and beat her to death."

"No—please! Your Highness, please don't kill me! Princely consort! Prince Cheng! I've served Your Highness for so many years! Your Highness!" Mengxi struggled as she was dragged away. Soon, her wailing could be heard from the courtyard, and this was the scene Song Lingxin was met with when she rushed into the east wing. All the blood drained from Song Lingxin's face, a series of wails echoing around her.

Ignoring the screaming from the courtyard, Mu Hanzhang continued to sip his tea at his leisure. Jing Shao gazed at him, thinking that this decisive and resolute version of Junqing was strikingly beautiful.

Sensing the prince watching him, Mu Hanzhang felt somewhat uneasy. Did Jing Shao find him cruel and cold-blooded? Quietly clutching his sleeve, he slowly turned to check, and when he met a pair of eyes filled with tenderness and admiration, he breathed a sigh of relief. How could he have forgotten? This man had fought countless battles and understood that sometimes killing was necessary.

Noticing Lady Song's arrival, Mu Hanzhang set down his teacup and slowly scanned the crowd before standing up. "Since you serve the Prince Cheng Estate, you must know your place and fulfill your duties. Just because His Highness is benevolent and has never been cruel to his staff, you think you can act however you please?"

"I would never!" They all fell to their knees, bowing with their foreheads touching the floor to show their obedience.

"Tonight, you will all stand in the courtyard for two hours. Make sure you get a good look. From now on, anyone bold enough to commit such treasonous acts will share the same fate!" Mu Hanzhang didn't permit them to rise to their feet, instead looking down at Concubine Li, who was collapsed onto the floor. "Duofu, go make the arrangements. Send Concubine Li to the nunnery by tomorrow. She may keep her hair."

"Certainly!" Duofu, the only servant still standing, answered with a bow.

Song Lingxin secretly breathed a sigh of relief at these words. She figured that the story of her inciting Lady Li was a mere one-sided accusation that no one could prove. From what she could tell, she'd most likely been brought here just to give her a bit of a warning.

And unfortunately, she was right. Mu Hanzhang had no evidence. So, he looked toward Jing Shao to ask for his opinion.

Jing Shao frowned. Right now, he couldn't even bear to look at his awful secondary wife. The reason he'd had to work so hard at court for the past few days was all thanks to her loose tongue and that presumptuous father of hers! He gave a derisive huff and said, "Lady Song manipulated others to sow discord and passed messages out of the estate without permission. This Prince will request an edict by the morrow to demote her to serving concubine!"

Ignoring Song Lingxin's screeches of complaint, Jing Shao stood up, feeling a headache coming on. Every one of these women in his harem was a handful all on her own. If he wanted to live longer in this lifetime, he needed to distance himself from such scourges. He looked up toward his consort, dressed in white, his handsome face gentle and serene, and suddenly had the illusion that he was looking at a single spoonful of purity in a sea of mud. Helplessly, he drew Mu Hanzhang into his arms. He waved at Duofu to guide everyone out into the courtyard where they could look at Mengxi and reflect on their mistakes, then took his consort back into their bedchamber.

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FROM THAT DAY ON, Mu Hanzhang's unshakable position as the rightful wife in the Prince Cheng Estate was established. The formerly chaotic household

gradually grew orderly in the following months under Mu Hanzhang's guidance. The estate, which had been much like a dragon's den or a tiger's lair for Jing Shao, was finally a home he could get a good night's sleep in.

At court, the matter of whom to send to suppress the Southern Territories had already been debated for several days, but Emperor Hongzheng had yet to announce his decision.

When Jing Shao went by the Ministry of War for his routine check-in, he quietly hinted that he thought this would be a good chance to earn military distinction and expressed his eagerness to pursue this opportunity.

Then, Jing Shao tasked someone to whisper news of both the first and third prince's desire to lead this expedition to the fourth prince, who was still under house arrest.

Various factions were still locked in a heated argument, yet the three princes allowed at court remained silent.

"A prince's expedition is indeed good for both appeasing the populace and enlightening the barbarians," said Emperor Hongzheng, his gaze sweeping over his three sons below. The first prince had his head bowed, his expression unreadable; the second prince's gaze was poised and candid; meanwhile, some impatience was showing in Prince Cheng's eyes. "Which one of you three is willing to go?"

When Emperor Hongzheng recalled the empress's words from the night before, he felt a twinge of annoyance. She'd said something along the lines of: "The third prince is wild and headstrong, and he might grow rebellious if he accomplishes too much, while the first prince comes from a humble background, and the second prince is a mere scholar. Meanwhile, the fourth prince, as a legitimate son, has no military accomplishments yet." No parent in the world actually thought poorly of their own children, and as the ruler of a nation, he could discipline his sons however he wanted, but he couldn't tolerate anyone saying a single bad word against them.

First Prince Jing Rong took a step forward and said, "Your son is willing to go!"

Everyone immediately turned their attention toward the princes; Jing Chen remained expressionless, and Jing Shao didn't move.

"Jing Shao, why don't you want to go anymore?" Emperor Hong-zheng frowned. Hadn't he said this would be a good opportunity to distinguish himself in battle just the other day?

"To report to Father, this one had a chance encounter with a folk sorcerer yesterday, and he divined that for the next three months, it would be inadvisable for your son to lead any troops, as going to battle would surely result in defeat," Jing Shao said with a perfectly straight face. "Your son could not tarnish the empire's dignity for the sake of momentary glory!"

"What utter nonsense!" Emperor Hongzheng abruptly slapped the armrest of the dragon throne.

Jing Shao hastily got on his knees. "Your son is ignorant. Please, quell your anger, Father."

Emperor Hongzheng was so furious that it looked like his beard might twitch right off his face. "Since you know you're ignorant, go back and copy *The Art of War* ten times. You are not allowed to attend morning court until you finish copying it

all!”

“Yes, Father.” Jing Shao kowtowed and accepted his punishment, attracting sidelong glances from the court ministers. Prince Cheng was really making things worse and worse for himself all the time.

“Convey our decree: First Prince Jing Rong is to lead troops to suppress the Southern Barbarians’ rebellion, and he is to depart in three days!” Emperor Hongzheng issued forward, then glared down at the still kneeling Jing Shao before turning to leave with a swish of his sleeves.

Ignoring the murmuring ministers behind him, Jing Shao dejectedly walked out of the palace, dejectedly returned to his estate, then dejectedly nestled into the arms of his consort.

“What’s the matter now?” Mu Hanzhang put down the ledger he was holding and patted the man nuzzling against him.

“Junqing, I’ve been punished by Father, and I won’t be able to go to court for a while.” He buried his face in Mu Hanzhang’s chest and mumbled, “Let’s go stay at the villa. There’s a hot spring there, so we won’t have to bathe in a wooden tub every day.”

Wordlessly, Mu Hanzhang stared at the prince, who had sneaked a hand up and was currently trying to tug his robe open. The villa and hot springs were what he’d wanted all along, weren’t they?

Chapter 23:
Temple Fair

"THERE IS STILL a lot to handle within the estate, and besides, if Father is punishing you, and you immediately run off to play at your villa, won't that invite criticism?" Mu Hanzhang sighed, then gently pushed the man in his arms away and picked up the ledger again.

Jing Shao let his push send him tumbling onto the daybed. "Father asked me to copy *The Art of War* ten times. It'll take at least a month to copy it all, so I can't exactly stay cooped up at home the whole time, can I?"

Mu Hanzhang shot him a glance and pretended not to hear him. He set aside the ledger he'd reviewed and picked up a roster of the estate. "There's something I need to ask your opinion on."

Although most of the culprits related to the drugged soup had been identified, they hadn't found any clues regarding the origin of the aphrodisiac until today. The names of those involved in this incident had all been circled, but one of them in particular was a bit of an issue.

"Yanji?" Jing Shao frowned. "Let's hold off on this for now. We'll deal with it in three days after the first prince has left on his expedition." Princely Concubine Liu had been given to him by the first prince. Even though he knew she was problematic, getting rid of the concubine he'd gifted Jing Shao just before his expedition would surely spark gossip.

"I do have an idea, actually." Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together and glanced at Jing Shao. He hesitated and then said, "Your Highness, have you truly never touched her?"

Jing Shao sat up and self-consciously rubbed his nose. "Why would I lie to you about something like that?"

"What this one meant to say is that the fourth prince's house arrest will be lifted next month, and as an elder brother, it is of course your place to present him with a congratulatory gift," Mu Hanzhang said slowly, his eyes lowered.

Jing Shao's eyes lit up. "You mean I should give her to Jing Yu?"

All concubines beneath the rank of an imperial consort could be given away, and since the first prince had gifted him a menace, he was totally free to regift that menace to someone else. Even though the first prince and the fourth prince seemed rather close, they were merely friendly only on the surface, with their hearts still in opposition. There was no way the first prince wouldn't want to take advantage of such a convenient source of information.

What a clever plan, diverting the flood away from them and toward their enemies!

"Junqing, you're so smart!" Jing Shao was so thrilled that he pulled his consort into his arms and gave him a kiss.

"Your Highness…" Mu Hanzhang pushed him away, his ears tinged slightly pink. He was discussing serious business; couldn't this man try to behave?

In the end, they decided to get rid of any servants who'd participated in the aphrodisiac incident but to not make any moves on Yanji for the time being. They would wait for the middle of the Third Month when the fourth prince was released, and then they would send her to him.

***

AFTER NOON, Jing Shao happily took a nap with his consort in his arms, then followed him to the little study, where one handled the estate's affairs while the other copied *The Art of War*.

The Art of War was a comprehensive compilation of military strategies commissioned by the founding emperor at the dawn of the dynasty, edited by four scholars, that summarized military strategies formulated over hundreds of years. It certainly was a good series; however, when Jing Shao looked at the complete set piled half a foot high, his face fell regardless. It might even take him longer than a month to copy this ten times.

Mu Hanzhang took one look at the man sprawled motionless over his desk after copying only three pages and slid over a cup with fresh tea brewed by Miaoxi.

"I'll finish handling nearly everything in the estate over the next several days. There is a temple fair on the third of the Fourth Month that we can visit, and after that I can keep you company at the villa for two days." Once he'd handed out the monthly allowance on the first of the Fourth Month and chosen new maids and pageboys on the second, essentially nothing pressing would remain.

Hearing this, Jing Shao perked up immediately, and after taking a sip of tea, he started copying again. But he didn't hold out long before he started fidgeting and finally said, "I'll go practice my swordplay for a bit and then copy some more after." Then he tossed his brush aside and left.

Mu Hanzhang shook his head, laughing softly. A father knew his son best, and the reason His Majesty had punished Jing Shao by making him copy books was because he knew Jing Shao hated writing and couldn't sit still. Mu Hanzhang took the booklet of lines Jing Shao had barely started, studied his robust and forceful calligraphy for a moment, then picked up his brush to continue from where he'd left off.

When Jing Shao returned, he discovered that the mere five pages he'd managed to copy had turned into more than thirty, and in those additional pages, the handwriting was somehow exactly the same as his own!

"Junqing, did you write this?" Jing Shao asked, holding the booklet as he approached his consort, who was ladling out a bowl of soup at the dining table.

Mu Hanzhang gave a slight nod. "When I was little, I did the homework for my elder brother and my two cousins, so I learned how to imitate other people's handwriting."

"But can you imitate anyone's handwriting?" Jing Shao seized his hand in excitement. If he could mimic any handwriting, then that meant he could forge letters —this could be incredibly useful on the battlefield!

"As long as it's not too distinct, then it's possible," said Mu Hanzhang, handing Jing Shao a bowl of soup. He had no idea why Jing Shao was so excited.

Jing Shao fell silent for a moment before he slowly said, "Junqing…you are truly a one-of-a-kind gem!"

"It's merely a parlor trick with no real value." Mu Hanzhang smiled. All of his talents—imitating handwriting, bookkeeping—were skills scholars looked down upon. "It is precisely because my studies were too diverse that my teacher didn't let me participate in the Metropolitan Examination the year after I became a Provincial Graduate." The light in his eyes dimmed. He had become a Provincial Graduate at seventeen, but his teacher had felt that he wasn't yet ready for the exam and had asked him to wait another three years, never knowing that those three years would become forever.

Jing Shao couldn't work out how to comfort him and instead changed the subject. "Tell them not to prepare breakfast tomorrow. I'll take you to The Flavor of Nostalgia. Xiao Yuan and his gentleman wife are both fascinating people."

The next day at the restaurant, Jing Shao immediately regretted this decision. His consort and Zhou Jin had clicked right away and started chatting about business management. Zhou Jin, clad in emerald green, enthusiastically invited Mu Hanzhang to participate in their monthly gathering of married gentlemen wives, and Jing Shao as well as the likewise neglected Xiao Yuan had to eat their soup dumplings in each other's silent company.

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THE 3RD OF THE FOURTH MONTH came in the blink of an eye, and the temple fair in the southern part of the city became a buzzing hub of activity. There were stalls, street performers, fortune tellers, monkey trainers—crowds jostled each other to take in a great variety of sights.

Jing Shao led his consort through the crowd by the hand. The weather was already starting to grow hot, so the couple wore matching sapphire-blue silk. Jing Shao wore a set of silver vambraces inlaid with jewels, while Mu Hanzhang had donned a wide-sleeved, diaphanous mantle. The two equally handsome men stood out completely from the crowd.

The streets were lined with stalls selling snacks and baubles, and Jing Shao bought a serving of fried dumplings. They were vegetable dumplings made of flour, tofu, and bean sprouts, fried golden-brown in a pan of hot oil and drizzled with sauce, altogether looking rather tempting. Jing Shao stuck one on a bamboo skewer and held it before his consort's mouth.

Mu Hanzhang frowned—eating on the street was highly improper and not very gentlemanly, but he didn't wish to turn down Jing Shao's kind gesture. He looked around to be sure he wasn't being watched, then quickly opened his mouth and ate the dumpling off the skewer. The crispy dumpling, complemented by a savory sauce, was surprisingly delicious. Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but smile.

Naturally, Jing Shao hadn't missed a single one of his wife's reactions. Just as he was about to tease him, a vaguely familiar silhouette briefly flashed through his

peripheral vision. His head snapped up to see a figure in a pink skirt disappearing into the crowd, and he caught just a glimpse of a profile that shook him to the core. Acting on instinct, he discarded the dumplings he was holding and turned to chase after her.

"Li'l Spoon…" Mu Hanzhang watched as Jing Shao let go of his hand to chase after a pink-clad woman. In no time at all, he had vanished into the crowd without a trace.

"Aiyoh, I didn't think a princely consort was allowed to leave the house. Why don't you even have a bodyguard?" said a familiar voice from behind him. Mu Hanzhang furrowed his brow. This infuriating flippant voice could only belong to his cousin, Mu Yangwen.

"Brother, I see you're here for the temple fair as well. What are you doing all on your own?" Mu Hanzhang turned to look, and as he'd predicted, it was his elder brother Mu Lingbao and his two cousins, Mu Yangwen and Mu Huafeng.

Jing Shao didn't manage to pursue the figure for very long before she vanished without a trace.

"Your Highness, who are you looking for?" asked a bodyguard, approaching from his hiding place in the crowd.

"You two, look for a woman in pink with a vermilion mole at the corner of her brow. Her name is probably 'Ruoyi.'" Only after delegating the task to two of his guards did he remember that he'd left Junqing behind, and he immediately started frantically running back. There were so many people at the temple fair, and Junqing was so pretty that he unfortunately might be confronted by lechers or loose women.

Just as he'd expected, when he returned, there were three men surrounding Mu Hanzhang. They were facing away from him, so he couldn't tell what they were up to, but judging by his consort's expression and his tightly pursed lips, he was clearly angry. Jing Shao's head ignited with flames of fury. He walked over, grabbed the collar of the ringleader, and without so much as a hello, punched him right in the eye. Then, he sent the other two toppling to the ground with a leg sweep.

Mu Hanzhang's eyes widened, and his mouth was still half open in surprise when Jing Shao pulled him into his arms. "Junqing, are you okay?"

"Li'l Spoon, they're…" Mu Hanzhang looked at the three people lying on the ground, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly as he tried to repress his expression.

"You call this doing your job? Both of you standing by while the princely consort is being accosted?" Jing Shao scolded the two bodyguards behind him before looking down at the three "lechers" on the ground. The two clutching their kicked stomachs looked somehow familiar, while the one climbing to his feet with a black eye seemed to be his…brother-in-law Mu Lingbao?

Chapter 24:
Ruoyi

THEIR VISIT TO THE TEMPLE FAIR was cut short by their encounter with Mu Lingbao and his cousins. As Mu Hanzhang rode a horse home with his husband, he recalled how those three had had to smile and try to appease them after being embarrassingly defeated, and he had to hold back his amusement.

Seeing the man in his arms pinching his lips together and trying not to laugh, Jing Shao decided that he should seek out more opportunities in the future to beat up those three men. When Mu Lingbao had pushed his little brother into the water as a child, those two cousins had also been present. On the anniversary of that event this year, he'd have to find someone to toss them into the river for a little swim.

The Prince Cheng Villa was to the east of the city, and so was the overgrown woodland that the Beiwei Estate had allocated Mu Hanzhang. It wasn't long before they reached the property, the land littered with scattered rocks. Mu Hanzhang turned his head, and found Jing Shao pensive, deep in thought. Was he still thinking about that woman in pink? As he recalled how the prince had reacted to seeing her, the upturned corners of Mu Hanzhang's mouth slowly flattened into a line. "Li'l Spoon…"

"Hmm?" Jing Shao came back to himself and looked down at him.

Who was that woman? The question almost escaped his mouth, but he swallowed it back down. Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together and turned to take in the woodland. "What do you think could be done to this overgrown woodland to make it profitable?"

"Profitable?" Jing Shao looked at the forest and let out a snort. "There's more stone than soil under those trees. You can't ride a horse through it to go hunting—" Suddenly, Jing Shao pulled on the reins and brought them to a stop, gazing thoughtfully at the land before him.

The densely packed trees went on for at least fifty acres, all of it dotted with many rocks and dense with thick shrubs, bramble, and wild grass; it was impossible to see what was inside. It was an ideal location to place an army camp! On top of that, it wasn't even seven miles from the capital! It was a shame that all the land around the capital was already taken—when the founding emperor established the nation, he had allocated the land around the capital to several founding dukes and marquises. If he openly bought this useless overgrown woodland, it would surely arouse suspicion.

"Junqing, do you know who this forest belongs to?" If he could acquire it, it would make a lot of things easier for him, and it could act as insurance in the face of future calamity. Even if he'd have to put in some effort, Jing Shao wanted this piece of land.

Mu Hanzhang hung his head, breathed a light sigh, and said, "This patch of woodland comprises most of my personal fortune."

Jing Shao froze in shock for a moment, then started laughing heartily and kissed the man in his arms on the cheek. "Junqing, you really are my lucky star!"

"Huh?" Now, Mu Hanzhang was frozen instead.

"Why don't I trade you twenty acres of fertile farmland in the Qi County for this woodland?" Jing Shao nudged his horse's flank with a foot, sending Shadow galloping again.

"Feel free to use it as you wish." Mu Hanzhang assumed Jing Shao's only intent was to help him deal with his useless property. "But twenty acres of fertile farmland for this is an entirely unacceptable trade."

"It's completely acceptable—this woodland is worth more to me than even two hundred acres of fertile land!" Chuckling softly, Jing Shao tightened his arm around the man sitting in front of him and urged Shadow on even faster.

***

IN THE EVENING, the two guards sent by Jing Shao to search for the pink-clad woman returned unsuccessfully and knelt to apologize. "Please forgive our incompetence…"

"Forget it. Perhaps This Prince was mistaken." Jing Shao waved a hand to dismiss them, then fell into contemplation with a frown. The woman he saw today at the temple fair had really looked like Ge Ruoyi.

Her importance couldn't be understated; she was the key to pacifying the three feudatories.

In his previous life, the first time he'd seen Ge Ruoyi was at a banquet at the fourth prince's estate. This young woman had danced a performance of *Butterfly Loves the Flower* with such mesmerizing mastery that he could remember it like it was yesterday. She'd left an impression so deep that when he saw her several years later in the estate of King Dongnan, he'd recognized her at a single glance. She had an irreconcilable vendetta against King Dongnan and had come to the capital to petition the emperor, but she had been intercepted by the fourth prince. Once she'd escaped his estate, she had somehow managed to infiltrate the estate of King Dongnan and had become his favored concubine.

Jing Shao had led the troops to pacify the three feudatories in his past life, and despite King Dongnan being lecherous and greedy, he'd taken war seriously.

In the 18th year of Hongzheng, an arrow had almost taken Jing Shao's life, courtesy of one of King Dongnan's generals. Just as he thought he was going to die, news reached him of King Dongnan's sudden demise. And it was at the very hands of this frail-looking young woman that looked like a wind could blow her over!

When Mu Hanzhang came to call Jing Shao for his bath, he happened to see Jing Shao lost in his memories and couldn't help but quietly clench his sleeve.

With no further news on Ge Ruoyi's whereabouts, Jing Shao had to put it out of his mind for now.

Now that his consort was helping him copy the books, Jing Shao could confidently spar with Ren Feng and the others during the day at the villa without a care and spend his evenings soaking in the hot spring and drinking wine with Junqing. Every day was filled with joy. He finally understood why Mu Lingbao and

those two cousins always picked on Junqing—having someone else do your homework for you was honestly really wonderful.

They had agreed to stay for two days, but once they were there, Jing Shao found he never wanted to leave.

***

THE 9TH DAY of the Fourth Month was Marquis Beiwei's birthday. In addition to the longevity celebration painting by Mu Hanzhang, Jing Shao also presented a generous gift. Mu Jin, the Marquis, greeted Jing Shao even more warmly this time, but in response to Jing Shao's subtle attempts to win him over to his camp, he kept his position vague. Jing Shao didn't mind: He knew how this old fox's mind worked. So, he maintained an air of superiority despite wanting his support and didn't try to force the issue.

To everyone's surprise, the Fourth Prince Jing Yu also came to offer birthday congratulations. However, after dropping off a gift and exchanging some pleasantries with Mu Jin, Jing Yu left quickly because he was still under house arrest. He had only been able to come because he'd asked his mother to request the emperor's grace to leave for half a day. Most of these noble houses in the capital were related by marriage one way or another—including the House of Beiwei and the empress consort's birth family, the House of Yongchang—so it seemed reasonable enough for the fourth prince to request permission for this.

When Mu Hanzhang noticed that his father was warmer even to the fourth prince than to Jing Shao, he felt a chill in his chest. With a quick apology to his father, he told him that Jing Shao was also being punished and couldn't stay long, before whisking him away.

"Junqing, I'll be all right." Sitting in the carriage, Jing Shao watched his stone-faced princely consort and felt warmth envelop his heart. Aside from his mother and his elder brother Jing Chen, the only person who got upset when he was treated poorly was Junqing.

"The fourth prince is now old enough to choose an imperial consort, and it just so happens that the legitimate daughter of the House of Beiwei is still unwed. My father…" Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together. His father knew perfectly well that Jing Shao and the fourth prince were in different factions, yet he was still considering this. Even though the intent was to ensure the survival of the House of Beiwei, such favoritism was truly disheartening.

"Junqing…" With a heavy heart, Jing Shao wrapped him in his arms. "When you're born into a noble house, there are certain things that you cannot ask for."

Mu Hanzhang breathed a sigh and relaxed against Jing Shao's chest. Quietly, he began, "I know—"

The horse let out a sharp whinny, and their moving carriage stopped so abruptly that the two passengers lurched forward. Jing Shao only managed to stop Mu Hanzhang from hitting his head by quickly tightening his hold and bracing against the carriage's floor with one hand.

“Please forgive me, Your Highness. This is my fault,” came the coachman’s immediate apology.

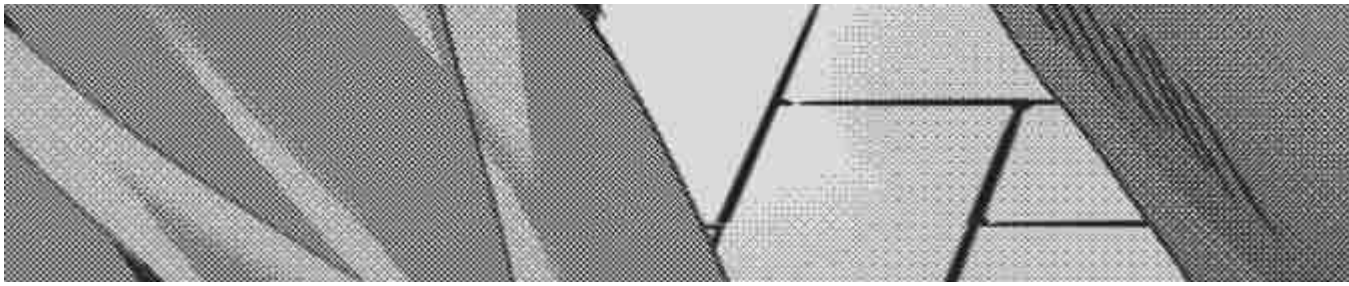
First ensuring that Mu Hanzhang was unharmed, Jing Shao then asked, “What’s going on?”

“The fourth prince and his guards stopped suddenly, and I couldn’t halt the carriage in time.” The coachman half raised the curtain to shed light on the situation ahead.

A woman in pink was kneeling in front of their horses, holding a petition written in blood above her head. When she said something too distant to hear, Jing Yu, wearing his mustard-yellow casual attire, suddenly dismounted his horse and began to walk toward her.

“Damn it!” Jing Shao released the man in his arms, quickly leapt out of the carriage, and rushed ahead of Jing Yu to the woman, grabbing her arm. “Ruoyi, I finally found you!”

“You’re…” The woman kneeling on the ground was, in fact, Ge Ruoyi. She had heard that today was Marquis Beiwei’s birthday, and so she’d taken her petition and blocked the highest-ranking person she was able to find. But then, a man in moon-blue finery had suddenly rushed out to grab her and even called out her maiden name. Her surprise was so great that she froze on the spot.



“Brother, you know this young woman?” Jing Yu frowned. “She’s saying she wants to petition the emperor.”

“She’s, well—she’s a dancer I met in the desert.” Jing Shao pointed at his own head, twirling a finger, and continued, “Foreigner, you know. Not quite right in the head.” Before Ruoyi could explain herself, Jing Shao delivered a knife-hand chop to the side of her neck that rendered her unconscious, then left her to his bodyguard.

Looking over the unconscious Ge Ruoyi, Jing Yu realized that even though she looked worn out and exhausted, she was undeniably stunning and a rare beauty. He didn’t doubt Jing Shao’s words, however, because she really had said that her name was something like Ruoyi earlier.

“I’ll send you an even prettier girl another time,” Jing Shao promised, and smiling, patted Jing Yu’s shoulder. After a brief, superficial exchange, they each went their separate ways. Jing Shao turned around and let out a breath in relief, then asked the guard to go ahead of him and bring Ge Ruoyi to the villa.

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AFTER NOON, Mu Hanzhang sat in the study to continue helping Jing Shao with his lines, but the look on Jing Shao’s face when he saw that young woman still haunted him. Jing Shao had left him alone yesterday to chase after her, and he’d done it again today. Moreover, he’d even gone to check on her right after lunch…

Mu Hanzhang’s heart ached terribly, and by the time he’d pulled himself together, he realized that he’d copied the wrong line and had to tear out the page and start over. But as soon as he placed brush to paper, he found himself writing out “Shao” three times!

Chapter 25:
Jealousy

"THIS PRINCE WILL SUBMIT a memorial to Father tomorrow, but don't expect too much." Jing Shao looked at the sky, and noticing that it was time to have dinner with his consort, he set down his teacup and rose to leave.

Ge Ruoyi dropped to her knees with a thud, loudly kowtowing. "Your Highness shows great kindness and virtue. I will thank you in advance on behalf of my entire tribe."

Jing Shao sighed, then turned and left. King Dongnan was a tyrant, but since the founding emperor had granted him that southeastern fief, he had full authority on how he governed it. No matter how great an injustice the Ge clan had suffered, for the sake of the bigger picture, his father would likely suppress this matter. However, something would inevitably still need to be done about him, so even if this information on King Dongnan couldn't currently be used as leverage, it would eventually be useful later on. At the very least, his father would appreciate his report.

For the past several days, Mu Hanzhang had habitually lost track of time while copying, so Jing Shao went to check for him in the study first. There was no one there, only a half-finished booklet on the desk, the pages rustling in the wind. Jing Shao walked over to the desk to close it and put it away, and he noticed a few crumpled balls of paper under the desk. When he opened one, he found nothing on it but three massive splotches of ink. He couldn't help but laugh—no doubt Junqing had grown tired of copying as well. He'd better do it himself tomorrow and give Junqing a day off.

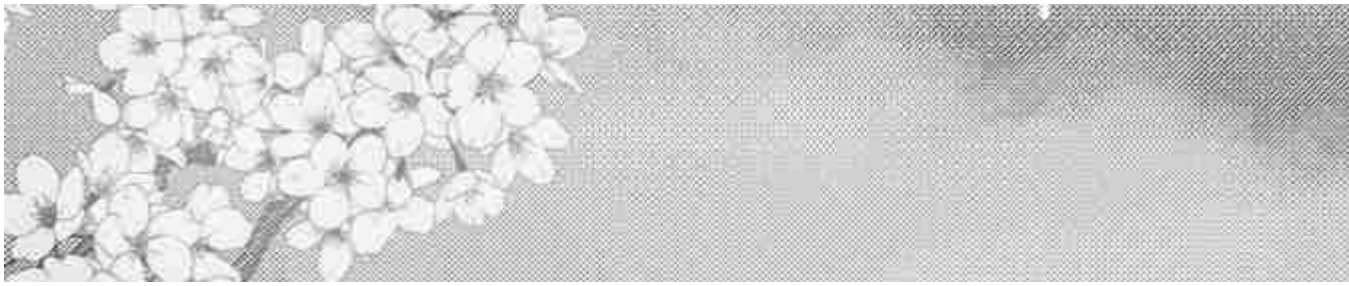
"Where is the princely consort?" he asked. He'd arrived at the dining table, but there was still no sign of his wife.

"To answer Your Highness, His Highness said he had no appetite and returned to his living quarters," Yun Zhu replied honestly instead of giving the excuse Mu Hanzhang had fed him. As far as he was concerned, their gentle princely consort was already sad enough without having to make up stories to spare this heartless prince's ego and avoid spoiling his dinner. To the young boy, this seemed extremely unfair!

"No appetite?" Jing Shao frowned, then left for the living quarters. Junqing always ate on time, so if he suddenly wasn't hungry, was he feeling sick?

The villa's living quarters included a bedchamber and an attached courtyard. A white marble hot spring pool took up most of the courtyard, with water fed from an underground stream that bubbled out of a thousand-layered lotus carved out of green jade. This hot spring pool was Jing Shao's favorite place in the entire villa, and there were staff whose job was to change the seasonal flower trees planted beside the pool. Currently, there were several blossoming dwarf peach trees.

Mu Hanzhang lay half sprawled over the side of the pool, reaching out to catch the fluttering petals as they fell. His smooth, fair back was exposed above the water, enveloped by a misty vapor that made him look almost ethereal. Crystalline beads of water ran down his outstretched fingertips, gliding over the petals in his palm and bringing them down into the pool with the glistening stream of water.



The fallen petals sank beneath the surface; but alas, though the flowers might long to be borne by the water, it let them go unclaimed…

Confronted by this scene as he walked into the courtyard, Jing Shao was filled with an immediate thirst. He quickly stripped himself of all his clothes and leapt into the pool.

There was a massive splash, the resulting wave of water hitting Mu Hanzhang across the face. Instinctively, he tried to shield himself with a hand, but before he even knew what was happening, someone suddenly emerged from the water and tightly embraced him.

"Ah!" Mu Hanzhang exclaimed. After he saw who it was, he sighed helplessly. "Why is Your Highness not at dinner?"

"I should be the one asking you that." Jing Shao held on and refused to let go. Because they were in the water, the skin under his hands felt exceptionally smooth, and he couldn't resist stealing a caress or two. "Are you feeling unwell?"

Mu Hanzhang's mouth became a firm line, and as Jing Shao tried to lean closer and closer, he gently pushed him away. "This one is fine."

"Oh, he says he's fine." Jing Shao reached out and pulled him back in so he could press a kiss to those tightly pursed lips. "You must be in a bad mood, no? Didn't Xiao Yuan's gentleman invite you to a gathering in a garden at the south side of the city tomorrow? Just go and enjoy yourself tomorrow. I'll handle the copying."

Mu Hanzhang raised his head to look up at Jing Shao, whose smile reached his eyes. Even though this tenderness was genuine, it wasn't his alone. He looked down and silently stared at the misty surface of the water; peach petals fell onto the water, spinning slowly and leaving tiny ripples until they gradually sank beneath its surface.

Jing Shao scratched his head, unable to work out why he was so upset. "Junqing, if you've run into some trouble, you can tell me anything…"

Mu Hanzhang kept his expression carefully neutral, and took a deep breath. "That young lady from earlier today…is Your Highness planning to make her a princely concubine or…" As he said this, the ache in his heart resurfaced. His brows came together against his will.

Jing Shao was momentarily dumbfounded. That was until he was struck by the truth. His consort was…jealous? He pulled the man—still lost to his own pining—into his arms and searched out those pink lips to kiss him fiercely, trying to convey his feelings.

Mu Hanzhang moaned and didn't resist until the prince's tongue slid into his mouth, wet and slippery, and he instinctively tried to push him away. But Jing Shao simply held him even tighter, the hand at his back gradually caressing down his spine toward his ass.

When their long kiss finally ended, Mu Hanzhang immediately gasped in air, leaning against Jing Shao's shoulder to catch his breath.

Jing Shao inhaled deeply as well, then he held Mu Hanzhang close and sat down in the water, stroking the man's back as his breath slowly grew more even. "Ge Ruoyi is…" Feeling the body in his arms stiffen, he couldn't help but smile and gently bite his earlobe, flushed by the steam. "She's the daughter of a generational merchant family in the Dongnan Fiefdom. King Dongnan took a liking to the Ge clan's legitimate-born eldest son and intended to imprison him as a pleasure slave.

I'm not sure of the exact details, but King Dongnan eventually ended up killing off the entire Ge clan, and that eldest son, Ge Ruoyi's older brother, was unable to endure the humiliation and chose to end his own life."

Mu Hanzhang looked up at him. "She really was here to petition the emperor?"

"Well, of course. This woman is going to be very useful. I can't let her fall into the fourth prince's hands." Jing Shao frowned; the story he'd told Ge Ruoyi—something about having been entrusted by an old friend of her family to help her—wouldn't work on Junqing. Not knowing how to explain, he didn't plan to elaborate. "At any rate, it's not what you think. I will never take a concubine again, nor will I marry another secondary wife."

Mu Hanzhang's beautiful eyes abruptly widened at those words. "You don't even have heirs. You can't possibly mean that."

Jing Shao smiled at him. "Since I've already taken a man for a wife, it doesn't matter whether or not I have heirs. And besides, ever since I met you, it's been difficult for anyone else to catch my eye."

"Li'l Spoon…you…" Mu Hanzhang looked at him in shock. How could an imperial prince not desire offspring?! Were these his true feelings? The sharp bitterness in his heart was replaced by a sudden sweetness. He slowly set his chin on Jing Shao's shoulder. "Me…me too…" *Me too! I'm also fond of you!* He was ultimately too shy to say this out loud.

But Jing Shao understood these unspoken words anyway, and lowering his head, he caught those reddening lips in a kiss. This time, Mu Hanzhang didn't resist, instead parting his lips slightly to invite him in. Naturally, Jing Shao couldn't let this lovely gesture go to waste, and he twined his tongue with Mu Hanzhang's, one hand gently stroking his nape. The other trailed gently from his shoulder, sliding down until it was over his chest, his fingers kneading and pulling softly at one erect bud.

Mu Hanzhang moaned, shivering at the sensation, and he nearly bit Jing Shao's tongue. Chuckling, Jing Shao pulled one of Mu Hanzhang's legs toward him so that Mu Hanzhang could sit on his lap facing him.

As both of them had stripped before entering the hot spring, their current position brought Junqing's slowly rising erection into close contact with Jing Shao's, already at full mast. Jing Shao pulled his shy consort another inch closer, pressing and sliding intimately up against him.

Mu Hanzhang let out a muffled groan, and with just this, he became fully hard.

Jing Shao took one slender and luminous hand, interlaced it with one of his own, then enveloped them both within their clasped hands, subsequently dipping down to suck and nibble on the same reddened nipple he'd already been teasing.

"*Ah!*" With his chest and his cock both attended to, Mu Han-zhang's head began tilting back, and as Jing Shao suddenly sped up his movements, he flung his head back, overwhelmed. Shimmering droplets flew into the water from his wet hair, creating an indescribably alluring sight.

For a time, the only sounds that emerged from the mist-enshrouded hot springs were the bubbling water and an occasional gasp. Peach blossom petals of mid-spring drifted and fell with the wind, creating ripple after ripple, their pale color tinting the springs a delicate red.

Chapter 26:
Gathering

AFTER NOON THE NEXT DAY, Jing Shao brought his consort to The Flavor of Nostalgia and asked Zhou Jin to take him to the capital's monthly gathering of gentlemen wives. Today, Zhou Jin actually wasn't dressed in garish colors; his navy-blue robe made him look far more reliable.

"Mister Zhou, I'll be leaving Junqing in your care." Jing Shao cupped his hands toward Zhou Jin.

"Your Highness may rest assured." Zhou Jin was a bright and outgoing person to begin with, and he was also older than both of them. Once they got to know each other, even Mu Hanzhang started calling him Mister Zhou.

Watching Jing Shao going on and on like a parent entrusting his child to a caregiver, he smiled helplessly and said, "Your Highness, don't worry, just go. Do you think I'm going to get lost?"

Jing Shao scratched his head and mounted his horse. Most of the gentlemen attending this gathering hailed from families of dignitaries and nobles, but with Junqing's intelligence, he probably wouldn't be at a disadvantage. Comforted by the thought, he left the carriage and Yun Zhu behind and rode Shadow off to drink tea with his elder brother.

The southern half of the city had beautiful scenery, and many noble families had built gardens here. The monthly gatherings mostly took place in the Ink Garden, which was the property of Duke Mao.

Though it was an unwritten rule that spare sons and the common-born could marry other men, it wasn't something that had to be strictly adhered to. The House of Mao, however, had solidified it as a clan rule—even if you were not attracted to men, a common-born son must take a man as his primary wife. And so, of all the noble houses in the capital, the House of Mao had the most gentlemen wives.

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AS SOON AS MU HANZHANG and Zhou Jin stepped into the Ink Garden, they were met with the sound of string and woodwind instruments. Past layers of black bamboo, a spacious waterside pavilion came into view, set up with chairs and tables laid with refreshments. Performing by the shore were three young women: one zither player and two flautists. Their music was soft and compelling, beautiful beyond compare.

"Well, this certainly is a cultured place." Mu Hanzhang looked at the small group of people who were sitting in the pavilion to absorb the performance. He'd been dreading the busy, lively scene of a typical ladies' gathering, but that didn't seem to be what was happening here. He let out a quiet sigh of relief.

“Welcome, Mister Zhou.” At the sight of Zhou Jin, several people stood up one after another, politely cupping their hands in greeting.

“And this is?” At the head of the group was a man dressed in a light-blue robe who looked to be in his mid-twenties, around Zhou Jin’s age. He was handsome, but there was a deep crease in between his brows, likely caused by frowning frequently.

“This is Princely Consort Cheng, Lord Mu,” said Zhou Jin, smiling. As men, they disliked being referred to as madam or lady, so they referred to each other by the title “Lord.”

“Greetings, Your Highness.” The group exchanged a look at this information, then stepped forward to pay their respects.

“At such an occasion, there is no need to follow strict formalities,” Mu Hanzhang said and humbly and courteously asked them all to rise.

“I have long heard that the Erudite Gentleman possesses an extraordinary presence. Today’s meeting certainly confirms that reputation.” The man leading the group smiled warmly and invited them inside.

“It’s merely an empty honor I garnered at a poetry gathering while young and reckless.” When he heard this man call him by his former title, Mu Hanzhang felt as though he’d gone back in time, to when he used to attend poetry gatherings with other scholars. He couldn’t hold back his delight, immediately feeling a sense of closeness with the person before him.

Zhou Jin introduced them to Mu Hanzhang one by one—the man who led the group had the surname Lin and was the wife of the second son of Marquis Dingnan, while the others were essentially all spouses of court officials.

“Why don’t I see anyone from the House of Mao here?” asked Zhou Jin.

“They’ve gone cockfighting with the gentlemen from the House of Rongchang. We didn’t feel like spectating, so we stayed here for the music.” Whenever Lord Lin spoke, his brow naturally furrowed—he appeared burdened by troubles.

“What seems to be on your mind?” Zhou Jin found himself asking when he noticed that Lord Lin couldn’t stop frowning.

Lord Zhang, who had been shelling sunflower seeds nearby, answered on his behalf. “Second young master is insisting on marrying the legitimate-born daughter of an official’s family as his secondary wife. Lord Lin’s life is already hard enough, and now his husband wants to marry a secondary wife of higher social standing…” He trailed off into a sigh.

Mu Hanzhang took his time drinking his tea as he listened quietly to their conversation. All these men were educated, and so their speech was relatively reserved, leaving a lot unsaid. But from what he did manage to catch, he could tell that most of them weren’t happy at home.

Their husbands were often of common birth, and some of them had been forced into marrying a man with no say in the matter. To add to that, few sons were raised from birth with the expectation they’d become wives, so most of them had no idea how to manage a home. And once the concubines had children, it was even more difficult to manage. Therefore, unless one had his husband’s favor—even in cases where the couple managed to treat each other with respect—few men who were trapped in a harem with no prospects managed to live a comfortable, contented life.

“I heard that Prince Cheng demoted his secondary wife to serving concubine last month. How did you manage that, Lord Mu?” The talkative Lord Zhang suddenly directed the conversation toward Mu Hanzhang.

“It was all His Highness’s idea,” Mu Hanzhang said lightly as he set down his teacup, unwilling to divulge their internal affairs.

“You brat. Why are you acting like such a gossipy woman these days?” Zhou Jin gave Lord Zhang a smack on the head, putting an end to this line of questioning.

Mu Hanzhang picked up his teacup again. He’d noticed that even though Zhou Jin’s husband was only a young vice minister, and himself a restaurant owner, he had a stellar reputation among these noble gentlemen, with everyone respectfully calling him Mister Zhou. Aside from his candid and easygoing nature, what made him worthy of admiration was the fact that Xiao Yuan had been married to him for almost eight years and still hadn’t taken a single concubine. For a wife that couldn’t give his husband any heirs to boldly prevent his husband from taking any concubines, he must certainly have possessed some extraordinary skills.

“Aiyoh! Here I was wondering who this fancy gentleman might be, but it turns out it’s just Hanzhang!” said a sarcastic voice from beyond the waterside pavilion. As the gathering turned to look, six men emerged from behind the bamboo forest accompanied by several attendants, making a grand procession of it as they approached the pavilion.

Mu Hanzhang frowned as he recognized the owner of the voice: Du Yinghao, his classmate of five years. The headmaster of the Mu clan’s private academy had once achieved the title of Tertius Flower in the Palace Exams, and due to his prominence, relatives not of the Mu clan were also occasionally sent there to study. Du Yinghao was Marquise Beiwei’s nephew, and because he’d been jealous of how often Mu Hanzhang was praised by the headmaster, he’d deliberately made things difficult for him.

“It’s been two years since we last met. Here I thought you’d gone to take the Provincial Exam, but I see you’ve married into the House of Mao.” Remaining seated, Mu Hanzhang shot a glance at his arrogant former classmate, then continued to calmly sip his tea.

“Hmph. What does it matter if you became a Provincial Graduate? Didn’t you still get married off by my aunt?” Du Yinghao huffed derisively. The Du family was not a particularly prestigious one, so even though he was a legitimate-born second son, he’d still been married off to the third son of Duke Mao to form a marital alliance.

Du Yinghao intended to keep going, but his second brother-in-law, standing nearby, shouted, “Show proper respect!”

In this generation alone, there were three gentlemen wives in the House of Mao. And after paying their respects, they took their seats.

Seeing Mu Hanzhang still the subject of others’ adulation and respect, even after getting married off, Du Yinghao felt indignant and couldn’t resist making a jab at him. “Yesterday, I was at the Beiwei Estate for a birthday celebration, and I saw something rather interesting.”

The group, tired from partying, had fallen into idle chatter over tea, so they leapt at the change of topic, curious as to what he’d witnessed.

“Prince Cheng saved a beautiful young woman out from under the hooves of the fourth prince’s horse.” Du Yinghao grinned and faced the expressionless Mu Hanzhang, deliberately dragging out his words. “I heard Prince Cheng is so fond of her that he took her to his country villa without pause, and he’s keeping her there as a mistress.”

After he said this, the lively atmosphere deflated, and the group all fell into an awkward silence, not sure how to proceed. But they were all thinking the same thing: Even Princely Consort Cheng wasn’t all that favored. Apparently, Prince Cheng had demoted his secondary wife for him, only to turn right around and find himself a mistress.

Seeing Du Yinghao do his best to mock him, Mu Hanzhang could only find it amusing. Despite all these years, he was still so childish. He glanced at the sky and said, “It’s getting late. I’ve been staying at the villa lately, so I must leave soon.” Then, he set down his teacup to take his leave.

Prince Cheng’s villa was east of the city, and the Ink Garden was on the south side. It really was quite far, making it improper for them to persuade him to stay. And so, everyone stood to see him off.

Once they were outside the Ink Garden, the wife of the second young master of the House of Mao apologized to Mu Hanzhang. “Third Brother doesn’t know anything—please don’t hold it against him, Your Highness.”

Mu Hanzhang smiled but did not respond. Yun Zhu drove the carriage over, and just as Mu Hanzhang was about to board, the sound of hooves began to approach.

There was a bright, clear neigh, and a black steed came to a sudden stop in front of them. The man on the horse sat tall, with a commanding presence and a remarkably handsome face—it was none other than that heartless Prince Cheng, Jing Shao, that had been the subject of their conversation.

Realizing who it was, those present immediately knelt to pay their respects. “Greetings, Prince Cheng.”

He gestured for them to rise, and when he saw that his consort was already standing in front of the carriage, he chuckled. “I was worried the trip might be difficult if you left too late, so I came to get you.”

“I was keeping an eye on the time.” Mu Hanzhang’s lips curled into a smile as Jing Shao trotted over on horseback, reaching out a hand toward him. He initially hadn’t intended to be overly affectionate in public, but when he caught the envious look on Du Yinghao’s face, he impulsively placed his hand into Jing Shao’s palm, letting his strong husband pull him up and onto the horse where he sat right in front of him.

“Yun Zhu, take Mister Zhou back before returning to the villa,” Mu Hanzhang instructed the pageboy, who still stood next to the carriage. After bidding farewell to everyone, he left with Jing Shao, leaving only a swirl of dust in Shadow’s wake.

Du Yinghao had turned red with rage, while Lord Lin and the others looked on enviously. The only one who didn’t seem to care was Zhou Jin, who was too busy being overjoyed at getting a free luxurious carriage ride home.

From that day on, word that Prince Cheng deeply cherished his consort quickly spread throughout the elite circles.

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THE FULL SET of *The Art of War* was far too thick. So, considering that it would take at least a full month for one person to copy it alone, in order for both of them to have time for fun and so that the prince could maturely acknowledge his mistakes, Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang began to do their copying work together.

In the mornings, one would practice martial arts while the other handled household affairs, and in the afternoon, they'd both set up a table in the garden so they could enjoy the flowers while copying. In the evenings, they'd soak in the hot springs together. Their days were rather pleasant.

Regarding the matter of Ge Ruoyi, Jing Shao wrote a memorial and submitted it, then waited three days without hearing anything. On the fourth day, he'd just had lunch and was sitting in a lounge chair in the sun, cuddling his consort, when he was summoned to the palace by an imperial edict.

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HANDS CLASPED behind his back, Emperor Hongzheng was studying a painted map on the wall as he asked Jing Shao, "What are your thoughts on what happened in southeast Dongnan?"

In a kneel behind him, Jing Shao chose his words carefully. "The Ge clan is not a prominent one, so perhaps this incident isn't well-known throughout the Dongnan Fiefdom. But when that young woman came to the capital to file a petition, your son had no idea how to handle it either and so had no choice but to report everything to you, Father."

Emperor Hongzheng nodded but didn't ask Jing Shao to rise. His focus remained on the map that occupied the entire wall in front of him. "Do you know why the founding emperor granted fiefs to the vassal kings?"

"The previous empire was governed unjustly, and when the found-ing emperor fought to conquer the land with the three rebel kings, they made an agreement that whoever first breached the capital would become the emperor." Jing Shao looked up at the map he'd seen countless times in his previous life. Xinan, Dongnan, and Huainan: Including his suppression of the Southern Barbarians' rebellion, these wars had taken him a full ten years. "Upon conquering the land, the founding emperor, in his benevolence, granted them the hereditary peerage of vassal kings."

"We do not wish to meddle in the governance of the feudatories," Emperor Hongzheng said. Though his back was still to Jing Shao, his expression hidden, Jing Shao knew what his father was thinking.

Jing Shao declared, "Dongnan may be a fief, but it is still part of the Chen Empire, and the people of Dongnan recognize only you, Father, as their emperor."

Emperor Hongzheng whipped around at these words to fix his eyes upon Jing Shao, who remained kneeling on the floor. Jing Shao kept his head slightly lowered, letting him glare.

Moments passed, until finally, Emperor Hongzheng burst into a bright, hearty laugh. “You truly are Our son!” He walked over to Jing Shao, patted him on the shoulder, and said in a low voice, “The three feudatories are a thorn in my side, but now is not yet the time.”

Jing Shao’s pupils contracted sharply, but his expression remained unchanged. He kowtowed and said, “Your son understands now.”

His father was saying that it was not yet the time to pacify the feudatories, and that for now, the matter of Ge Ruoyi needed to be suppressed. With this in mind, it was unsurprising that in his past life, Jing Yu had dared to blatantly keep her as a concubine, eventually forcing her to personally take vengeance. And no wonder Jing Yu had dared to propose abolishing the feudatories. It was because Father had already given him the go-ahead.

Chapter 27:
Hot Taro Potato

THE FIGHT with the three feudatories was inevitable—what Emperor Hongzheng meant was that he simply hadn't found a reasonable enough justification yet. Forcing a male commoner into concubinage wasn't considered a serious enough crime to suggest abolishing the feudatories. In his past life, when Jing Shao's life had been at stake during his attempt to fight the rebels in Yunnan-Tibet, Emperor Hongzheng had ordered King Xinan to send reinforcements. To their dismay, King Xinan had demanded provisions from the imperial court before he would send any help, using hardship in Xinan and a recent natural disaster as pretext. This angered the emperor greatly and led to the decree to abolish the feudatories. Meanwhile, Jing Shao, who had just expended great effort to annihilate the Southern Barbarians, received another edict that ordered him to immediately march south to attack the Xinan Fiefdom without even returning to the capital.

In this lifetime he was no longer required to go on that thankless expedition to quell the Southern Barbarians' rebellion. So, perhaps it would be better for the War of the Three Feudatories to begin sooner rather than later. Jing Shao was so deep in thought that by the time he realized what was happening, Shadow had already taken them to the second prince's estate.

"You little rascal—still thinking about the nice meal you had at brother's estate, aren't you?" Jing Shao laughed as he tugged on Shadow's ear. If he went straight from a summons at the palace to Jing Chen's, it would surely arouse suspicion, but just as he was about to turn the horse around, he encountered Jing Chen coming back from work.

"What are you doing loitering at the door? Why haven't you entered?" As he'd exited his palanquin, Jing Chen had spotted his little brother idly pulling at his horse's ear in front of his estate's gates, and he'd frowned with secondhand embarrassment. The only person who'd dare ride a horse through the capital's streets was this worrisome little brother of his. Why had Jing Shao been spacing out in front of his gates? Was he in trouble again?

Jing Shao dismounted and scratched his head, saying, "I wanted to get a drink with somebody, and then before I knew it, I was already in front of your gates."

Jing Chen shot him a glare. "You're not a child anymore, and yet you're still wholly preoccupied with riding and drinking—what a disgrace!"

Jing Shao smiled, handing his horse's lead to his brother's attendant and then walking over to his brother. "Let's go to The Flavor of Nostalgia. It's the closest."

Jing Chen rubbed his temple, instructed the palanquin bearers to return to the estate, and walked to The Flavor of Nostalgia with Jing Shao.

It wasn't yet dinnertime, so The Flavor of Nostalgia wasn't crowded. Jing Shao asked the proprietor—clad in deep red—for a private dining room.

"You're aware of who this Zhou Jin is?" Noticing how close these two seemed, Jing Chen couldn't help frowning a little.

“Of course I am.” Jing Shao poured his brother a cup of tea. “Xiao Yuan is a member of the reformist faction, but he’s not inflexible. You can try to get him on your side, Brother.”

“As long as you’re mindful of the situation.” Jing Chen nodded. Today, an official from the Ministry of Rites had mentioned that Princely Consort Cheng and Vice Minister Xiao’s gentleman wife seemed quite close and speculated that there must be some involvement between Prince Cheng and Xiao Yuan. Acknowledging that his brother understood the stakes, he decided not to intervene.

Having accidentally run into his brother, Jing Shao figured he might as well tell him what had happened at the palace, so that Jing Chen could plan accordingly. He still wasn’t sure what he wanted to do about Ge Ruoyi. Their father wasn’t going to help her, as the incident wouldn’t be enough to justify attacking Dongnan, and he prioritized the bigger picture. If they publicized the event after the war began, it would be overshadowed and ignored in the face of everything else to do with the war. On the other hand, if the story spread before they were ready to deal with it, it would lead people to assume that the imperial court didn’t care if commoners lived or died and that the government was weak and useless. Father had left the decision of how to deal with this woman entirely up to him.

“If it’s too much trouble, send her over to my estate and your sister-in-law can keep her in check,” Jing Chen suggested. Princely Consort Cheng was a man and couldn’t be in the women’s quarters to constantly keep an eye on her, and his secondary wife had been demoted. Although the second imperial consort wasn’t particularly gentle or considerate, she was very talented in her management of the harem.

Jing Shao’s brow furrowed. Ge Ruoyi was the key to pacifying Dongnan. The reason he’d prevented the fourth prince from taking her was because he didn’t want him to delay her from killing King Dongnan, which would save him from a few years of fighting. But this was impossible to explain to his elder brother, so he just shook his head. “She could still be useful. I’ll talk it over with Junqing when I get back.”

Jing Chen nodded. He was quite satisfied with his new brother-in-law. He was extremely knowledgeable and remarkably humble, perfectly suited to assist Jing Shao, who was inept at both scheming and politics.

Just then, a commotion downstairs interrupted their conversation.

“Gentlemen, let’s talk this over calmly!” A waiter sweated profusely as he desperately tried to stop a fight, but the two brawling men didn’t even seem to notice.

Jing Shao opened the door and peeked outside, discovering two elegantly dressed men fighting in the main hall. Neither of them seemed skilled in martial arts, and the fight lacked any sense of decorum. The taller man appeared to have the upper hand and had knocked the other one to the ground.

The one laid low seemed somewhat familiar, so Jing Shao took a more careful look—wasn’t this Mu Lingbao, whom he’d just seen recently? He still had a black eye. As for the taller man…

“Duke Mao’s heir,” Jing Chen informed him, recognizing Jing Shao’s gap of knowledge. “The empress recently spread the word that she wanted to choose an imperial consort for the fourth prince. Both the houses of Duke Mao and Marquis Beiwei have legitimate daughters who are still unwed.”

Jing Shao understood immediately and couldn't help but snort a laugh. The House of Beiwei certainly tried to play the field, but unfortunately, the one the empress consort had preferred in his last life was Duke Mao's daughter. This future father-in-law of the fourth prince had been one of the culprits behind his wrongful imprisonment.

"If Marquis Beiwei forms an alliance with the empress consort through marriage, you should distance yourself from their family and not bring up what happens at court in front of your wife." Jing Chen closed the door before anyone downstairs could see Jing Shao; after all, if someone saw him standing by and watching while his brother-in-law got punched into the floor, it wouldn't reflect well on him.

Discomfort gnawed at him from his brother's words. From his perspective, Junqing was more worthy of his trust than anyone, but he knew Jing Chen meant well. So instead, he huffed derisively and said, "That little sister of Mu Lingbao's is just like he is, spoiled rotten by Marquise Beiwei. No matter how much the empress consort wants to ally herself with Marquis Beiwei, I'm guessing she probably doesn't want Jing Yu to marry a girl like that."

At that, Jing Chen murmured, "If the young lady of the Mu clan is indeed as you say, why don't we…"

"Brother!" Jing Shao immediately cut his brother off. "Marquis Beiwei holds less military power than Duke Mao. His command is in the northwest, and he's planning to get into the horse trade there. That's going to be far more useful than Duke Mao."

"Is that so?" Jing Chen pondered this for a moment, frowning. "If that's the case, I will have someone reveal the disposition of the young lady of the Mu clan to the empress."

A wave of relief washed through Jing Shao. He trusted Junqing, but he couldn't explain this to his brother. Things were already difficult enough for Junqing in that household, so if the fourth prince and the House of Beiwei formed a marriage alliance, how was someone as scrupulous as Junqing meant to conduct himself when their two sides began to oppose each other?

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THE SKY HAD ALREADY DARKENED by the time he returned to the villa.

Jing Shao stepped into the bedchamber and found Mu Hanzhang in simple casual robes, sitting in the daybed, quietly reading a book. The soft candlelight illuminating his face only enhanced his serene beauty. Jing Shao couldn't help smiling; seeing this person made the chaos of morning court as well as the intrigues and conspiracies flowing underneath it all vanish into thin air.

He slowly closed the distance between them and buried his face in his consort's chest, taking a deep breath of the subtle fragrance that clung to him. Then he let himself relax and slowly closed his eyes. Since his rebirth, the world seemed full of blood and turmoil; only by this man's side did he feel at peace. He was the one salvation the heavens had granted him.

“What’s wrong? Did you get scolded by Father?” Mu Hanzhang patted the head resting on his chest.

“Nope, I’m just a bit tired from running around all day.” Jing Shao looked up at him—such a graceful and refined appearance, so utterly unlike Mu Lingbao with his round face and one black eye. He suddenly recalled that painting he’d seen in Marquis Beiwei’s study that day. “Junqing, is everyone in your line of this generation named after the Nine Sacred Relics of Antiquity?”

“For our particular branch of the family, yes. We three siblings are named after the sacred sabers,” said Mu Hanzhang warmly. Their father was obsessed with famous weapons and had even named his children after them.

Of the Nine Sacred Relics of Antiquity, three were blades: the first named Lingbao, the second Hanzhang, and the third Suzhi.

Jing Shao’s brow furrowed. “So, the young lady of the Mu clan is named ‘Mu Suzhi’?”

Mu Hanzhang nodded. “Why did it suddenly occur to you to ask me this? Is it because the fourth prince is going to choose a consort?”

“I was just curious,” Jing Shao said, shifting forward. “See, if your sister looks like Mu Lingbao, I’m afraid she’ll have a hard time finding a husband.”

“Their resemblance is nowhere near that striking.” He glared at the man lying on top of him, who had no filter, but when he thought of a woman version of Mu Lingbao, even Mu Hanzhang couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

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THE NEXT DAY, Jing Shao went to see Ge Ruoyi, who was temporarily staying in the villa’s small courtyard.

Once she was clean and refreshed, it was undeniable that Ge Ruoyi was a beautiful woman. It was easy to imagine what kind of a beauty that eldest son of the Ge clan had been, to make King Dongnan willing to murder his entire family to possess him.

“This is the current state of affairs: The imperial court can’t do much about King Dongnan killing people in his own fiefdom. Even if we investigate it, he’d just pin some crime on the Ge clan. The most we can accuse him of is oppressive governance.” Jing Shao breathed a sigh.

The hope in Ge Ruoyi’s eyes dimmed in an instant, her slender, supple hands gradually turning pale with how tight she’d clenched them into fists.

“There are some things that must remain unsaid, but This Prince can tell you that we will eventually reclaim the Dongnan Fiefdom. It’s just not time yet.” Seeing her reaction, Jing Shao slowly moved his hand to land on the dagger worn at his waist. He already knew how King Dongnan behaved, so even if he might personally have to put in a bit more effort, he didn’t mind getting someone else to carry out this assassination. But if Ge Ruoyi couldn’t stay patient, she’d be a liability.

“That Your Highness is willing to go to such lengths for a lowly woman like me is already a grace vast as the heavens. I also know that acting on my grievance will take time.” Ge Ruoyi paused, then knelt and kowtowed to Jing Shao. “Thank you, Your Highness, for your care these past few days. I’ll be sure to repay your immense kindness someday.”

Jing Shao slowly released his grip on the dagger. This young woman not only possessed courage and wisdom but also had a clearer view of things than most. When he’d seen her covered in blood at King Dongnan’s estate years ago, he’d sincerely admired her determination from the bottom of his heart. This was also why he was unwilling to deceive and use her, opting instead for honesty. In the end, Ge Ruoyi, like himself in his past life, had fought with all her might only to end up losing everything.

“This Prince will offer you two paths. One, wait in the capital city and don’t cause any trouble. In a few years, This Prince will settle this for you. Two, This Prince will get someone to teach you the art of concealed weapons and help you infiltrate King Dongnan’s estate so you can seek vengeance yourself.” Jing Shao quietly observed Ge Ruoyi, who knelt on the ground. His tone was steady and solemn. “If you’re not sure which to choose, come seek out This Prince once you have made up your mind.”

“I choose the second path!” Ge Ruoyi’s answer was almost immediate.

“You’d best think carefully”—Jing Shao frowned—“because if you choose not to go, This Prince can arrange a good marriage for you.”

“I’ll never regret it. Please grant my wish, Your Highness!” Ge Ruoyi kowtowed to Jing Shao three times, afraid that he might change his mind.

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As he left her courtyard, Jing Shao noticed Mu Hanzhang standing beneath a blooming peach tree, waiting for him.

“How did you know that she would choose the second option?” Jing Shao asked. He’d given her the ultimatum as a result of a discussion he’d had with his consort last night.

Mu Hanzhang smiled, plucked off a peach blossom, and tossed it into the water. “Even once willow catkins fall into the water, they remain as rootless as duckweed. Better to be a wildfire instead. She might destroy herself, but she would take her enemy down in that raging fire.”

Jing Shao felt enlightened by those words; if he’d had to live through this second life without his connections to Junqing and his elder brother, he would have ended up just like Ge Ruoyi, going to any lengths to annihilate his enemies—even if it meant toppling the empire.

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IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, it was already the second half of the Fourth Month, and the fourth prince's house arrest came to an end. Under the empress consort's advisement, Emperor Hongzheng also agreed to begin the selection of an imperial consort for the fourth prince.

Jing Shao, who was still at home copying *The Art of War*, responded to this by sending over his beautiful princely concubine to Jing Yu, both as a congratulatory gift for the lifting of his house arrest and as compensation for stealing a beauty from his little brother.

Chapter 28:
A Storm Brewing

THE FOURTH PRINCE found not a shred of delight upon receiving such a gift, knowing full well that Yanji had been given to Jing Shao by the first prince some years ago. Now that Jing Shao had regifted her to him, even untouched, he had no way to get rid of her—an elder brother could gift his younger brother a beauty, but younger brothers simply did not give elder brothers concubines, and he had no little brother who was of age.

Truthfully, Jing Shao had finished copying the books long ago, but he'd been slacking off for so long he didn't want to start attending court again.

Mu Hanzhang urged him to get back as soon as possible. "Things at court can change in an instant. With the fourth prince back, it's best to be cautious."

And so, after leaving Ge Ruoyi with Nine-Blade Ghost to learn the art of concealed weapons and tasking Ren Feng with tidying up the overgrown woodland in the capital's eastern outskirts, Jing Shao reluctantly packed his luggage and returned to the Prince Cheng Estate with his consort.

On the third day after the fourth prince's return to court, Prince Cheng completed his ten copies of *The Art of War*. Emperor Hongzheng reviewed them personally and interrogated him at length on the subject, and Jing Shao was able to answer all of his questions with ease and confidence. The emperor was greatly pleased and granted him ten bolts of tribute satin as well as forty pounds of fine pearls.

All the court officials thought that even though Prince Cheng couldn't inherit the throne, the emperor's favor toward him hadn't waned. It was only Jing Shao who knew that his father had rewarded him for his stance on the three vassal kings. He'd just happened to provide the right flattery at the right time.

Tribute satin was good material, and Jing Shao planned to get some new clothes made for Junqing and himself. He had no use for the pearls, though—right now, the only noblewoman left in the household was Song Lingxin, and he couldn't even stand the sight of her. So, he asked Mu Hanzhang to take all forty pounds of pearls with him to the Beiwei Estate and distribute them to his many female relatives.

Understanding that Jing Shao was trying to make Mu Hanzhang look good, he accepted the offer. He asked Duofu to pick out a few other gifts from the treasury, then took Yun Zhu with him to the Beiwei Estate.

He gave each aunt a cupped handful of pearls with both hands, sisters and cousins of his generation a handful each, twenty pearls to each of the concubines, and divided the rest evenly between his grandmother and Marquise Beiwei.

"Wow! These are tribute pearls, so they're all perfect spheres! I've only ever seen a few that my mother had!" His talkative Third Aunt hadn't stopped gushing over the gifts and couldn't even bear to put them down.

The rest of his aunts and sisters were also smiling, all of them addressing him affectionately as "princely consort."

Concubine Qiu was standing behind Marquise Beiwei, having recovered from her illness, and as she watched her son, finely dressed and exuding grandeur, some worry finally eased from her.

Marquise Beiwei, however, maintained a cold expression throughout and barely said anything before starting to scold Mu Hanzhang. “You are a man, and incapable of producing offspring, so you must be an even more virtuous wife than a woman! Right now, His Highness has no heirs at all, and you’ve dismissed all of his concubines. I’m too ashamed to even let people know about it! Those who are aware of my diligence know that you’re young and don’t know any better, but those who aren’t might think I never taught you anything.”

Third madam, in the middle of enthusiastically extolling the benefits of beauty soup made with ground pearls to fourth madam, broke off mid-sentence at the Marquise Beiwei’s outburst. Once her piercing voice went quiet, the entire room remained completely silent. Even though Marquise Beiwei was Mu Hanzhang’s principal mother, he was more importantly the princely consort of an imperial prince. His ranking within the hierarchy was higher than Marquise Beiwei’s. Everyone stayed awkwardly silent, unsure what to do.

Mu Hanzhang slowly set down his teacup and looked toward Lady Du with some amusement. The only reason she’d said this was because Jing Shao had sent the fourth prince a princely concubine. She was so confident that the fourth prince would be her future son-in-law that she was worrying about her daughter being treated unfairly once she married him.

“Mother, you worry too much. As a child, I studied the Four Books and Five Classics, and the one who taught me was the clan school’s headmaster. Even if I can’t adhere to the womanly virtues of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, it’s unlikely the ladies of the capital are going to mock you.” Mu Hanzhang slowly rubbed the rim of his cup and said meaningfully, “Everything that happens in the Prince Cheng Estate has always been His Highness’s prerogative. Taking your anger out on me won’t do any good, Mother.”

Marquise Beiwei slammed down her teacup and glared at him. After a long moment, she spoke; however, her tone was softer. “Don’t misunderstand; I mean to say that since you’ve married him, you must consider your husband’s family. His Highness is young, so you must advise him. As it’s no longer possible for him to inherit the throne, he needs to find a different path. If Suzhi marries the fourth prince, His Highness and the fourth prince will be brothers-in-law, and if anything should go amiss in the future, he’d at least have that support to fall back on.”

Mu Hanzhang found these words utterly hilarious. Did Lady Du think he was a toddler? Did she believe that brothers-in-law were closer than actual siblings? In the imperial family, even biological brothers could turn against each other, so being tied as brothers-in-law was next to worthless. He couldn’t help sneering. “How could an elder brother like me, who’s already been married off, make decisions about something like my little sister’s marriage arrangement? Besides, this matter is to be decided by Her Majesty. No matter what His Highness wants, he has no say either way.”

“Why you…” Marquise Beiwei’s anger had rendered her speechless. Yet Mu Hanzhang hadn’t said a single unreasonable thing; her daughter’s betrothal wasn’t settled yet and saying too much could affect her reputation. Marquis Beiwei glared at him for a while but had to drop the subject.

As a man, even though this was his parents' home, he couldn't stay long in the harem. Judging by the time of day, Marquis Beiwei should be home soon from morning court, so he left to go see his father.

At the same time, a major event was taking place at morning court.

King Xinan reported that their tribute had been intercepted by bandits en route to the capital, and citing ongoing hardship on the frontier, requested a reduction in the year's requirements for tribute.

"Our esteemed ministers, what are your thoughts?" Emperor Hongzheng asked in a deep voice, holding King Xinan's memorial in one hand, its light-yellow cover indicating its urgency.

"The Xinan region is near Yunnan-Tibet, which is currently in turmoil. They were undoubtedly helpless to prevent this robbery. In this one's opinion, the tribute can be reduced," said the Minister of Revenue, carefully choosing his words.

"How brazen these bandits are to have the audacity to rob a tribute convoy. In this one's opinion, troops should be dispatched to annihilate them and reclaim the tribute," said the Ministry of War angrily.

"This year's repair on Your Majesty's summer villa urgently requires the marble from Xinan. If the tribute is reduced, Xinan would still need to send additional marble," the minister of works stated hesitantly.

Because they relied on the fact that the marble would be arriving by the Sixth Month, no other stone materials had been procured. Even if they were to send more, it likely wouldn't reach the capital until the Seventh Month. No matter how they rushed the job, they probably wouldn't finish before His Majesty's summer retreat.

As the officials argued incessantly, each voicing their own opinion, the furrow between Emperor Hongzheng's brows only grew deeper. His gaze fell on the three princes. "What are your thoughts?"

The fourth prince had just returned to court and was eager to prove himself. Noticing his father's displeasure, he took a step forward. "Your son has heard that there was a spring drought in Xinan, and its people are suffering. Their tribute being stolen will only make matters worse. Though we may be reluctant to reduce the tribute required, it could demonstrate the emperor's benevolence to the people of Xinan."

Emperor Hongzheng's eyes were dark and unreadable, showing no hint of emotion. He didn't react to the fourth prince speaking out of turn before his two elder brothers. Instead, he turned to the second prince, who was silently gazing at the floor. "Jing Chen, what do you think?"

Jing Chen took a step forward and bowed. "The imperial court does not demand tribute out of greed, but to intimidate the three feudatories and assert the majesty of the throne. The tribute being stolen in transit falls under the responsibility of the Xinan Fiefdom, not the imperial court. Thus, your son believes that the tribute should not be reduced!" His voice was steady and deep, neither rushed nor too slow, pausing after each impactful sentence. The court, noisy just moments before, fell so quiet one could hear a pin drop.

The piercing sharpness in Emperor Hongzheng's eyes gradually softened, and a look of gratification took its place. He said nothing in response, however, and continued down the line to the impatient-looking Jing Shao standing next to him.

“Jing Shao, what do you want to say?”

“Hmph. The route tributes travel from Xinan to the capital doesn’t even go through Yunnan-Tibet! And on top of that, half of the tribute consists of marble weighing more than half a ton each—what bandit in his right mind would steal that?” Jing Shao had spoken without stepping forward or bothering to bow, as if exasperated by everyone else’s response.

In response to such blunt and rude speech, Emperor Hongzheng was not the least bit angry; he even began to smile. “Do you all understand now?”

In the end, Emperor Hongzheng decided to dispatch someone to investigate the robbery, but the chosen candidate for this task wasn’t mentioned at the meeting. King Xinan was ordered to first send another shipment of marble, and the matter of whether to reduce the rest of the tribute was set aside for later.

After morning court was dismissed, Emperor Hongzheng summoned Second Prince Jing Chen alone to the imperial study.

Jing Shao patted the dejected fourth prince on the shoulder, then went over to intercept Marquis Beiwei, who was just about to head home.

“Does Your Highness have advice for me?” Mu Jin politely walked alongside Jing Shao.

“Honorable Father-in-Law, it’s nothing so serious. Junqing is visiting your estate today, so I thought I’d come with you so that I can pick him up,” Jing Shao said with a mild chuckle.

“Hanzhang’s at the estate?” He couldn’t help but smile. “That’s wonderful. Your Highness might as well stay for lunch, then.”

“Then I’ll take you up on that—it would be the perfect time to grab a drink or two with you as well. I’ve been thinking about that liquor from the northwest since last time.” Jing Shao laughed heartily and let Marquis Beiwei go ahead of him before mounting his own horse.

Mu Jin looked at the respectful yet still approachable Jing Shao, then shot a glance at the fourth prince, who was walking away by himself with his head down a short distance away, and he frowned in spite of himself. He then turned and got into his carriage.

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DOWAGER MARQUISE BEIWEI had been in poor health for the past several years; she was bedridden all year round and rarely met with guests.

Mu Hanzhang went to pay respects to his grandmother and to present her with precious medicinal ingredients. The white-haired Dowager Marquise held his hand and spoke with him for a little while.

“I’m too old to handle anything anymore. Since you’ve married into the imperial family, you must be cautious in your words and deeds, and love and protect your husband. You are already a couple, which means that when one prospers, you both prosper, and when one suffers, you both suffer. You mustn’t hold any resentment toward him either. Prince Cheng doesn’t have it easy in the imperial family—when

the former empress was still here, he had a completely different life from what he has to put up with now. All hearts are made of flesh. If you're good to him, he won't mistreat you." The Dowager Marquise had spent her whole life in a noble house, and she saw things only too clearly.

"I understand, Grandmother. You needn't worry. His Highness is very good to me." Mu Hanzhang held the old woman's hand cradled in both of his own, a warmth filling his heart. Ever since he was little, Grandmother had cherished him. Not as much as the legitimate grandchildren, surely, but she was never overly biased. If anyone made things difficult for him, the old lady had done her best to protect him, and he'd been saved from enduring further hardships.

Grandmother was getting on in years, so after speaking for a little while, her energy began to flag. Mu Hanzhang waited on her until she fell asleep before withdrawing from the room. Just as he reached the front courtyard, he encountered a group of cousins returning from school.

"Aiyoh, isn't this the princely consort? What, did you get treated badly at the Prince Cheng Estate and come back to whine to your parents?" Seeing Mu Hanzhang, Mu Yangwen immediately took a jab at him out of habit.

Several of their much younger cousins couldn't help but burst out laughing.

Chapter 29:
Fragrant Balm

MU HANZHANG COLDLY LOOKED at the arrogant Mu Yangwen and walked over with measured steps. Then, he raised his hand and—*Thwack!*—his palm slapped squarely across his cousin's smug, grinning face.

Reeling from the hit, Mu Yangwen slowly turned back to face him. "Mu Hanzhang! How dare you hit me!"

Thwack! He slapped him again, this time leaving Mu Yangwen completely stunned.

"I am your elder cousin, so what makes you think you can call me by name? Hasn't Third Uncle ever taught you what filial piety entails?" Mu Hanzhang looked down at his cousin, who still wobbled from the force of the blow.

"Don't test your luck, Mu Hanzhang!" Standing up for his little brother, Mu Huafeng raised his fist in threat.

The two bodyguards behind Mu Hanzhang drew their sabers with a swish of metal, and, scared beyond thought, the two boys backed away simultaneously. Some of the younger ones even burst into tears.

"Stop this right now!" Marquis Beiwei's deep, resonant voice rang out from behind them as he rushed over in a fury.

Members of the Mu clan usually trembled at the voice of the master of the house, but hearing it today made them collectively breathe a sigh of relief.

"Junqing!" Jing Shao hurried over and pulled his consort into his arms. "Are you okay?"

Mu Hanzhang's lips were tightly pursed, yet he couldn't suppress the corners of his mouth from curling just a tad. He'd clearly been the one in charge of the situation, teaching his cousins a lesson. This man…

Once Jing Shao made sure the man in his arms was unharmed, he turned toward Mu Yangwen, who was clutching his cheek, and Mu Huafeng, who'd forgotten to drop his fist. "Your Lordship, setting aside that Junqing is my princely consort, is it not a rule in the Marquis's estate that one must respect their elders? The display of what this family considers filial piety, brotherly respect, and etiquette is certainly an eye-opener for This Prince!"

Mu Jin's face alternated between panicked blanching and flushing with rage. He pointed fiercely at his two nephews and said, "You two, go reflect on your wrongs along with the Heir. Each of you must copy *The Rules of Filial Piety* fifty times. If you can't finish before dinner, you won't be eating!"

Mu Yangwen went to protest, but he swallowed it down after a glare from Mu Jin, and the two of them began to leave.

"Hold on!" Jing Shao released his consort and stopped the two. "Family law cannot be separated from national law. What punishment should disrespecting the princely consort warrant?"

Without Mu Lingbao to back them up, the two brothers were unanchored. They exchanged a look, only now beginning to feel afraid, and turned to their uncle for help.

"Your Highness, please quell your fury. The children don't know any better." Stuck in an awkward spot, Mu Jin shot a look at Mu Hanzhang, who was standing a half step behind Jing Shao.

Realizing the situation, Mu Hanzhang stepped forward and took hold of Jing Shao's arm. He advised softly, "That's enough; we're all family here. Please don't be angry anymore, Your Highness."

Jing Shao patted that supple, slender hand. "Since the princely consort is choosing not to take offense, we'll put today's matter to rest, but if This Prince finds that anyone has disrespected him again, do not blame This Prince for disregarding family ties in the future!"

The cousins all flinched. After a nod from Mu Jin, they fled with their tails between their legs.

"Third brother, didn't Uncle give us a half day off because an important guest is visiting today, and we're supposed to keep him company? Why aren't we doing that right now?" asked the youngest one quietly.

"Shh!" An older brother hurriedly covered his mouth, and they all vanished into the center courtyard.

"This one has not disciplined his family strictly enough. How embarrassing for Your Highness to witness." Mu Jin let out a sigh, his eyes turning toward the extraordinary presence beside him—Mu Hanzhang, standing with elegant poise next to Jing Shao—and found himself feeling a little melancholic. There wasn't a single promising individual among the legitimate-born children of this generation! In retrospect, the one who best embodied the Mu clan's spirit was this common-born son whom he'd already married off.

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THAT AFTERNOON, when they returned to the Prince Cheng Estate, Master Yun hurried over with a report. "Your Highness, His Highness the second prince sent a messenger today asking you to go see him as soon as you get back."

Jing Shao frowned, and Mu Hanzhang said, "Elder Brother must have something urgent to discuss with you. Go on."

Jing Shao nodded, then mounted Shadow, galloping off again.

Mu Hanzhang went inside and took a nap. As he was getting up afterward, Yun Zhu arrived to inform him that Zhou Jin had come to visit. Mu Hanzhang quickly got dressed and went to the tea room in the Zephyr Pavilion.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mister Zhou."

"I really only just got here," said Zhou Jin, laughing warmly. "I work at a restaurant, so I don't get any free time until after lunch."

Feeling relieved, Mu Hanzhang asked Zhou Jin the reason for his visit.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to open up a small shop the last time we spoke?” Zhou Jin took a sip of tea.

The tea served in the estate was tribute tea, distributed by the Imperial Household Department, a rare delicacy unavailable on the market. Zhou Jin had a very discerning palate, and he couldn’t help taking a few more sips of the high-quality tea. “The capital already has everything it needs, so if your business isn’t an established brand, you’ll find it difficult to stay afloat. That is, unless you have something unique that you can’t get anywhere else.”

“Something unique?” Noticing that his guest was enjoying the tea, Mu Hanzhang gave Yun Zhu a meaningful look, which he perfectly interpreted, leaving the room.

“Mm-hmm. Actually, if you’re looking for a product unavailable in the capital which would sell well, I did see something like that when I was in Jiangnan,” Zhou Jin said, a mischievous smile flashing across his face. “I suddenly thought of it when I was going to bed last night.”

“Oh?” Mu Hanzhang was actually curious now. If this item was common in Jiangnan, but rarely seen in the capital, why hadn’t anyone else started selling it here yet?

Zhou Jin chuckled softly and took a sip of tea before uttering the two words: “Fragrant balm.”

“Fragrant balm?” Mu Hanzhang was stumped. What was that? He’d never heard of it before.

Zhou Jin laughed. “This product sells very well in Jiangnan. It wasn’t until I followed my husband to the capital that I realized people in the north rarely use it, and the closest thing you can find is a bland oil that doesn’t really smell like much.” He began to smirk wickedly as he elaborated on the wonders of this “fragrant balm.”

There were several well-known workshops in Jiangnan that specialized in making this balm, blending it with seasonal flowers to provide many different varieties. Balm differed from oil in that it was usually solid and easily transportable, and it melted at body temperature, making it simple to use. But since only a small amount was needed and it wasn’t very expensive, merchants often dismissed it as not worth the trouble for the profit it’d bring in, and thus they were unwilling to trade them this far north. There weren’t many flowers in the north either, so there were no local workshops that made the product…

Mu Hanzhang listened for quite a while before he managed to work out what application the balm had, and his handsome face flushed to the tips of his ears—it was apparently a salve used for lubrication in intimate relations between men. Merchants valued profit above all else, and although such an item would sell very well in the capital where there were many gentlemen wives, the long distance and thin profit margins meant few had tried to peddle such wares here.

Zhou Jin offered Mu Hanzhang an unopened box of fragrant balm, and when Mu Hanzhang noticed how unbothered he was by the topic of conversation, he realized that he was being unnecessarily reserved. So, he suppressed his embarrassment and calmly accepted it, asking Yun Zhu to give Zhou Jin some of the tea in exchange.

Zhou Jin happily accepted the box of tea leaves. Then, he invited Mu Hanzhang to come visit once he’d made a decision, and returned to work at The

Flavor of Nostalgia.

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JING SHAO RUSHED to the second prince's estate, where he learned that their father had chosen Jing Chen as the investigator of the tribute robbery. He couldn't stop himself from worrying.

"Father is giving me the chance to earn myself the title of imperial prince. It's a good thing. It's much better than going off to war like first brother, at any rate." Jing Chen felt deeply gratified to see his younger brother so concerned.

King Xinan was cunning and deceitful, and since he'd dared go this far, he must also have had a backup plan. No matter what his brother said, Jing Shao was still worried. "How many soldiers is Father planning to send with you?"

"In order to facilitate the investigation, we must proceed in secret, so Father only provided me with four bodyguards and one third-rank Attendant Officer," Jing Chen said.

"How is that going to work?!" Jing Shao barely prevented himself from leaping to his feet. As far as he was concerned, his brother wasn't any good at martial arts, and if he was only sent with four guards, they wouldn't even be able to handle bandits, let alone King Xinan's entire army! "I'll assign five hundred men to you. They'll follow from afar and reveal themselves if anything should happen."

"How would you hide five hundred people?! Absolutely not!" Jing Chen refused without a second thought.

After much bargaining, the brothers met each other halfway—Jing Shao would assign two master martial artists to accompany Jing Chen and send fifty soldiers ahead separately to disperse through Xinan, awaiting orders.

Jing Shao still felt uneasy by the time he left the second prince's estate, so he instructed Yun Song to head to the villa and ask Ren Feng to find two premium experts in the martial arts on his behalf.

When he returned to the east wing living quarters, he found his consort sitting alone by the lamp, holding a delicate little box in one hand, lost in thought.

He quietly approached and grabbed the box, turning it around to look at it. "What's this?" Opening it revealed a translucent salve with a delicate fragrance, which was actually somewhat enticing without being overwhelming.

"Um, this…this is…" Mu Hanzhang was initially startled, but he pulled himself together and immediately blushed. "It's the product sample Mister Zhou brought over today…"

"Oh?" Jing Shao raised an eyebrow, then slowly leaned in close to his consort, blowing a puff of air against one crimson ear. "Then how come your face is so red?"

Mu Hanzhang pinched his lips together, glared at Jing Shao, and snatched the box out of his hands. Then, he turned and went into the inner chamber, ignoring him.

Jing Shao was bewildered for a moment—he'd never seen his consort act so petulantly before. Stifling a laugh with a closed hand to his lips, he followed Mu Hanzhang into the inner chamber.

Naturally, he knew what that item was; even though it wasn't sold in the capital, the Imperial Household Department acquired some every year. The law stipulated that one could only take a man as a wife, and that taking one as a concubine was prohibited, but there was no such restriction on the Son of Heaven, so there were a decent number of gentlemen concubines in the palace. Besides, as an imperial prince who'd taken a man as a wife, the palace had granted him quite a bit of this. In the cabinet by their bed alone, there were several boxes of the highest quality fragrant balm.

In the inner chamber, he found his consort sulking on the bed with his clothes still on, facing the wall and ignoring him. His one exposed ear was still quite pink.

Repressing his laughter, Jing Shao lunged forward, pulling him into his arms. "I'll stop teasing you, I promise. It really is quite rare to see this item sold in the capital. If you want to start this business, it'd actually be quite easy. The regional commander of Jiangnan and I get along quite well, and he sends me a letter every ten days. I can just ask him to send some along with the messenger each time."

"That will never do!" said Mu Hanzhang, turning to frown at Jing Shao. "If he doesn't accept the money, wouldn't that be considered a bribe?" A minor thing like fragrant balm wasn't worth much money, so no matter whether the regional commander of Jiangnan interpreted the request from the perspective of a friend or a subordinate, he would undoubtedly insist on sending it for free. Mu Hanzhang wanted a source of income, but if it would get Jing Shao in trouble then it clearly wasn't worth it.

Junqing was so considerate; Jing Shao couldn't help pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "You don't have worry about that—that man is notoriously stingy, and he'll demand payment of every last copper. He might even ask for extra to cover the shipping expenses. I'll have to make sure to haggle properly."

Chapter 30:
An Emergency Report From Xinan

NOW THAT HE HAD a supply channel, opening a shop became that much easier. Mu Hanzhang asked Zhou Jin to pick out a storefront with two rooms on the street where The Flavor of Nostalgia was located. He also requested Master Yun find him some well-known carpenters and silversmiths in the capital to design a batch of tasteful wooden and silver boxes.

"Your Highness, what are these for?" Yun Zhu asked Mu Hanzhang, his arms full of the finished boxes. They were exquisitely crafted and cost even more than the balm itself. Wouldn't His Highness lose money by doing this?

Mu Hanzhang took a silver box off the top of the stack and smiled at him without an explanation, instructing Yun Zhu to carry them into the courtyard where Nana Zhou was staying. Most fragrant balm from Jiangnan came in bamboo tubes or iron boxes, and didn't cost very much. Even with a markup, the most expensive varieties might go for a hundred or so coppers at most. That would not be the case if he sold the balm inside a well-crafted box instead. In the capital, where high-ranking officials and nobles resided in great numbers, the more expensive something was, the more people coveted it.

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IN NO TIME AT ALL, it was halfway through the Fifth Month, and the shop was ready for business. Once the second shipment of goods arrived, Mu Hanzhang's little fragrant balm shop officially opened.

It was an elegantly furnished storefront, half concealed behind bamboo blinds. A bamboo plaque hung over the entrance with three words written in graceful yet powerful calligraphy: *The Ink Lotus.*

The word "Ink" was in reference to the Ink Garden often frequented by gentlemen wives, while "Lotus" implied the subtle fragrance of the balm. At the last gathering, Mu Hanzhang had brought some wooden boxes of balm to the other wives as gifts, and word had spread so rapidly that by the opening day, hundreds of shoppers and onlookers quite nearly blocked the entrance.

Unlike the firecrackers and lion dances usually seen at shop openings, Mu Hanzhang invited well-known musicians from around the capital to play the zither in front of the shop. Delicate notes drifted through the air, crafting an atmosphere of timeless elegance. Met with such a tranquil scene, the onlookers responded with restraint and merely listened quietly nearby.

The fragrant balm in the shop was divided into several tiers by the material of the box they were contained in: iron, wood, and silver, representing a wide range of pricing. The iron boxes cost just around a hundred coppers, the wooden boxes up to two taels of silver, while the silver boxes went for dozens all the way to a hundred taels of silver.

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EVER SINCE HIS ELDER BROTHER had left for Xinan, Jing Shao had been quite unhappy, having to face the fourth prince at court alone, without a single person to exchange secret signals with. It got so bad that he lazed around in bed every morning and struggled to leave, needing Mu Hanzhang to wake him three to four times before he was willing to crawl out from the covers and go to court.

Lately, however, Jing Shao had suddenly begun to enjoy going to court again—because there had been urgent news from Xinan that the first prince was in trouble in Yunnan-Tibet, his fate uncertain. The first prince used to send daily reports back to the capital, but it had already been ten days since the last dispatch.

The report from the Yunnan-Tibet Governor that arrived today clarified the situation. When the first prince had first made it to Yunnan-Tibet, he was so eager to attack the Southern Barbarians that he refused to listen to any advice. The forests in Xinan were thick with miasma, and soon after the army entered the mountains, many soldiers had fallen ill. Last month, after leading the troops into the mountain, the first prince had become mired in a difficult battle. He still had yet to return. This urgent report, sent over three thousand miles, had already been delayed for about a week. As of this moment, the fate of the first prince was still unknown.

The fourth prince, Jing Yu, fell to his knees and spoke urgently, "Father, given the current situation, troops must be deployed immediately to provide aid. Otherwise, First Brother will be in mortal danger!" Whether his tearful act was real or not, it seemed remarkably sincere.

"It's too late to send troops now. We must deploy troops that are already stationed nearby," said the minister of war in a low voice.

"Worthless!" Emperor Hongzheng angrily threw the memorial in his hand to the floor.

The court fell momentarily silent. An emperor's son going on an expedition was meant to strike fear into the Southern Barbarians and to reassure the populace, but now, only a month into his campaign, the first prince was already trapped in a grueling battle, his life imperiled, his fate uncertain. Instead of glory, he had brought endless complications upon the imperial court. Though the court ministers did not express this openly, privately, they thought the first prince was extremely incompetent.

"Father, please quell your anger. Your son has a solution." Jing Shao waited for the timing to be just right before he stepped forward with a bow.

Emperor Hongzheng took a deep breath, his eyes on Jing Shao. "Speak."

"The Xinan Fiefdom is closest to Yunnan-Tibet. Your son has heard that Xinan's army is powerful and well-equipped. Why not ask King Xinan to send troops to reinforce First Brother?" Jing Shao kept his head lowered to conceal the cold glint in his eyes.

He'd dealt with King Xinan for years and knew better than anyone what the man was like—both cunning and petty. If you asked him to send troops, he'd simply make excuses. There were more than a thousand miles between the capital and Xinan;

even if he only tried to debate the decree a single time, with messages traveling back and forth plus the time it would take the deployed troops to travel there, it would take at least a month before this rescue came. By then, whether he still survived would all depend on what fate wanted for his first brother.

Emperor Hongzheng had also suspected the tribute incident was a ploy, so by asking King Xinan to send reinforcements, he could take this opportunity to see whether King Xinan harbored mutinous intent. Shooting an approving glance Jing Shao's way, Emperor Hongzheng ordered King Xinan to send reinforcements to assist First Prince Jing Rong in quelling the rebellion. If the first prince was successfully rescued, Xinan would be exempted from their remaining tribute for the year.

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JING SHAO RETURNED to the estate in high spirits and found his consort sitting on the daybed, beaming at the ledger. Feeling compelled to steal it, he didn't resist, snatching it from him. "You looked so happy staring at this ledger. Could it be that it's more handsome than me?"

Mu Hanzhang shot a glance at this increasingly shameless man, but he wasn't at all annoyed. "Compared to every other person, you're easily the most handsome…" He let his sentence trail off, and when Jing Shao grinned, he took the chance to quickly grab back the ledger. "However! The ledger is not a person." This said, he went back to looking it over.

Though it was just the opening day at his store, business was already booming. The cost of each item separately wasn't high; the boxes were a bit expensive, but even adding the cost of the balm and the box together still equaled less than three-tenths of the selling price. The shop really did earn a lot.

"Hmph!" Jing Shao grumpily pushed his consort onto the daybed. "First Brother is in mortal danger in Yunnan-Tibet. We don't even know if he's still alive."

"Is that so?" At this, Mu Hanzhang finally shifted his attention away from the ledger.

Jing Shao loosely recounted the events that took place at court today, then sighed. "If King Xinan makes Father angry, the abolishment of the feudatories is imminent."

Mu Hanzhang cast his gaze downward and said softly, "Given the current situation, doing so will certainly lead to war. Will you go, Your Highness?"

Jing Shao sat up, took a deep breath, and slowly nodded. "If there's a war, I'll definitely go. Only I have the confidence to pacify the three feudatories!" Bright candlelight lit up Jing Shao's determined profile, which bore an unmistakable pride. His deep voice was steady and powerful, as if he were already standing on the battlefield, facing off against three hundred thousand soldiers and valorously declaring war!

Mu Hanzhang steadily stared at him, pursed his lips, and paused for a long moment before saying, "You're a capable man. It is I that has burdened you." This man had the makings of a great general, talent equal to that of the founding emperor,

but unfortunately, he'd been born in the wrong time.

"Junqing!" Hearing these words, Jing Shao felt an inexplicable pain shoot through his heart, and he couldn't help but raise his voice. On the cliff of Mount Fengyue, Junqing had said something like "You're a capable man. It is I that has burdened you…"

Startled by this shout, Mu Hanzhang looked up just in time to meet a pair of reddening eyes. Realizing he'd somehow misspoken, he grew suddenly flustered. "Li'l Spoon…I…"

Jing Shao pulled the man, who was unaware of the true impact of his words, into a tight embrace, as if by doing so he could meld them both into the same flesh and blood. "You can't ever say that again—do you hear me?!"

The arms around him tightened, squeezing Mu Hanzhang until it hurt. He frowned in pain but made not a sound; instead, he folded his arms around Jing Shao in turn. "I promise, I'll never say it again—" Despite his best efforts, he involuntarily let out a muffled groan.

Finally, this pulled Jing Shao out of his waking nightmare, and he let go in a panic. "Did I hurt you?"

Mu Hanzhang shook his head, but Jing Shao was already forcibly peeling him out of his robes. There, he found two deep red marks on Mu Hanzhang's fair upper arm, already turning bluish-purple. Jing Shao's heart ached terribly at the sight, and he brought out liniment to gently massage the area.

As he rubbed, the mood between them began to shift. The pain in his eyes gradually faded until his fingers, damp with liniment, slowly slid up to Mu Hanzhang's shoulder and then down to his chest.

Mu Hanzhang moaned and clutched at the hand drawing circles over one cherry-red nipple. He glanced around—they were still in the outer chamber, and the handmaidens could enter at any time. They couldn't keep going.

But Jing Shao had no intention of stopping; he pulled Mu Hanzhang into his arms and gently nibbled on his blushing ear. "Junqing, shall we consummate our marriage today?"

The scene on the cliff ran through Jing Shao's mind over and over again, and his heart was overwhelmed with an unbearable sorrow. He wanted to possess the man in his embrace, to become one with him, to prove that Mu Hanzhang still lived and breathed in his arms. He wanted to confirm that he wasn't just dreaming, that the tragedies had yet to happen!

Mu Hanzhang's eyes flew wide open as if he'd been struck by lightning. C-consummate their marriage? They'd been married for more than three months, and aside from their wedding night, they'd never gone all the way. He was terrified of the splitting pain that had felt as if his body was being ripped apart, and Jing Shao knew this, so had never forced him. Thus, he'd pretended to be oblivious and dodged the issue.

He turned and looked toward the man holding him. In those handsome eyes, aside from his usual tenderness and adoration, there was now a trace of almost fearful unease, and the way he kissed him felt frantic, as if he was rushing to confirm something. Mu Hanzhang knew that if he was unwilling, Jing Shao would never force him, but seeing Jing Shao like this today, he truly could not bear to refuse him again. If it could ease his sorrow, he'd readily endure another night.

Mu Hanzhang remained silent for a long while, and just as Jing Shao was about to give up, he slowly nodded, and whispered, “Can we…go to the bed?”

Jing Shao froze in surprise, then scooped Mu Hanzhang into a bridal carry before springing to his feet. Using all his agility, he practically flew into the inner chamber, kicking the door shut behind him!

Chapter 31:
Shocking News

JING SHAO LAID MU HANZHANG on the bed, and noticing him trembling slightly, kissed his cheek soothingly and raised a hand to let down the bed veil. Xiao Yuan had once told him that a darker environment could calm his wife down and prevent him from feeling self-conscious.

The space inside the curtains dimmed at once, and Mu Hanzhang slowly opened his eyes before quickly closing them again, but his body still relaxed. He felt one warm hand untie his headpiece and gently stroke the crown of his head, and a kiss fell on his forehead, as soft as water. Those lips glided over the bridge of his nose before reaching his lips. It was a touch as light as a dragonfly skimming over the water, and it slowly ignited a wildfire; Jing Shao cherished him so much, yet he was overwhelmed by desire and wanted to devour him completely.

Jing Shao could tell that the man in the arms was struggling to catch his breath, so he propped himself up on his elbows. Dimly lit by candlelight, the man beneath him had his robes half undone, his long hair strewn across the sheets under him, and his cheeks a little flushed as he gasped. Jing Shao thought it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

His snow-white satin underrobes were half open, revealing a chest as smooth and luminous as jade, but his arms were still caught in his sleeves, the partial concealment adding a touch of allure. Taking in this wonderful sight, Jing Shao felt like his heart might throb out of his chest. He leaned over and sucked an erect bud between his lips.

It provoked such an intense sensation that Mu Hanzhang whimpered low in his throat, immediately sealing his lips and trying to hold back the noise.

Jing Shao looked warmly at his bashful princely consort, then lowered his eyes again to continue savoring the small, charming nipple, already teased to a deep blush. He reached out to take the other one between his thumb and forefinger, caressing it gently with featherlight twists, as if strumming the strings of a zither, his tempo increasing as Mu Hanzhang's melody unfolded.

"Ah…" The moan broke through his clamped lips, quickly suppressed to a hum. Mu Hanzhang trembled, feeling he had no choice but to open his eyes to concentrate on the canopy above, distracting himself so he would stop making such strange noises. The man above him seemed to have noticed his intentions, however, and only teased the peaks of his chest even harder.

Feeling overwhelmed, Mu Hanzhang reached up to try to push him away, but his wrists were caught in one big hand and trapped above his head.

Jing Shao trailed kisses up his chest to his chin, traveling further to take one adorable ear between his teeth. One hand held down Junqing's disobedient wrists, while the other caressed the smooth skin of his abdomen, drawing circles and grazing softly with his fingernails, until like a nimble snake, his calloused hand slipped under the hem of his silken underpants.

Mu Hanzhang let out a moan and tried to curl away, but he couldn't escape those skillful fingers. As Jing Shao's hand took hold of his cock, he lost any strength to resist and could only turn a pair of beautiful eyes on the person tormenting him.

When Jing Shao saw his consort looking at him with such desperation, his heart immediately melted into a puddle. He released Mu Hanzhang's wrist and leaned down to kiss those lips that he'd already sucked to a rosy hue, encouraging Mu Hanzhang to wrap his arms around his neck to hold on. Quickly, he removed that last obstructing layer of soft silk and, after fumbling in a drawer by the head of the bed, fished out an elegant, well-crafted white jade box.

When Mu Hanzhang saw what he was holding, his cheeks, tinged the color of peach blossom, deepened to a red plum.

Jing Shao chuckled softly and kissed him. "This is a priceless tribute from Jiangnan; you can't buy this." Inside the jade box, the fragrant balm within was crystal clear, far more luxurious than even the highest-tier fragrant balm from The Ink Lotus. He scooped out some of the subtly scented balm with a fingertip.

Mu Hanzhang lightly bit his lower lip and closed his eyes. His long eyelashes trembled helplessly.

"Junqing, look at me," Jing Shao couldn't bear to see him like this; he stroked a finger over Mu Hanzhang's lips to try and rescue that poor lower lip. "Don't bite yourself, and don't hold it in. If it hurts, just tell me, understand?"

Mu Hanzhang opened his eyes and looked up at Jing Shao's handsome face, glistening with sweat. Those beautiful eyes were full of tenderness and compassion. He felt that this man would never harm him, and the fear in his heart gradually faded. He released his lower lip and gently nodded.

His slender fingers slick with the cool balm, Jing Shao ran them along the rim at Mu Hanzhang's entrance for a moment before slowly, tentatively pressing inside.

Mu Hanzhang turned his face away, clutching the bedsheets beneath him. Inexperienced with such treatment, his body naturally resisted the uncomfortable intrusion. But just as he was finally accustomed to one finger, Jing Shao added a second.

"Do you feel uncomfortable?" Sweat dripped from Jing Shao's chin onto Mu Hanzhang's chest.

Mu Hanzhang nodded, then shook his head, unable to determine whether this burning, tingling sensation was bad or something completely different.

When the man beneath him finally stretched to accommodate three fingers, Jing Shao couldn't hold back any longer. He spread those long legs and carefully pressed inside.

"*Ah!*" Mu Hanzhang let out a muffled groan before his voice completely failed him. His fingers clawed into the sheets beneath him, luminous hands clenching until his knuckles turned white, gripping so tightly they trembled. It took him a long while to catch his breath. His head tilted further and further back until a single tear trailed from the corner of his eye, and a tremor racked his body as he softly groaned, "It hurts… Ah…"

"Junqing, don't be afraid. Relax." It wasn't easy for Jing Shao either; he didn't dare to move an inch. He gently kissed each eyelid, stroking his arched back until his pain eased, and he slowly started to move.

There was a deep furrow between Mu Hanzhang's brows, and he was already bracing himself for another night of torment. But with the slow and gentle rocking movement from the man above him, the pain gradually subsided, replaced by something indescribable until Jing Shao nudged against something inside of him. A wave of terrifying pleasure suddenly enveloped his entire body, and his pained groans transformed into something sweet.

When Jing Shao heard this wonderful soft noise, he smiled and began to thrust freely.

Mu Hanzhang's short, soft moan gradually became a sweet, lingering chant. By the end, even Mu Hanzhang had no idea what he was saying, and the only thing that he remembered was falling into something like a boundless dream—he lay in a lone boat drifting on the sea, and he rose and fell with the great waves; he could no longer remember his own name, nor even remember what night it was.

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HIS ARMS SECURELY WRAPPED around the sleeping man, Jing Shao's lips curved in satisfaction. This man finally belonged to him completely; this man, who was to him the warmest and purest existence on earth, was now held firmly in his embrace, and no one could ever take him away.

In his first moment of waking into this new life, he had vowed to be good to Mu Hanzhang out of a lingering sense of guilt and pity from his past life. Perhaps he had subconsciously wanted to hold on to him like a lifeline, a way to feel warm and safe thanks to his old memories. But by now, after spending all this time together, Mu Hanzhang's every expression captured his attention, and that warm and silently resilient figure had gradually moved from a fond object of his interest to his heart's desire. When they became one, he knew there was nothing in the world more blissful than this.

As the saying went: "Under the warmth of a lotus canopy, they lingered through one spring night; from then on, the prince no longer rose for court at dawn."

Mu Hanzhang woke up as punctually as always and couldn't help furrowing his brow. His body was so utterly fatigued that he felt as if he hadn't slept all night, and he ached between his waist and hips, making him groan involuntarily. As he carefully tried to recall what had happened the night before, he suddenly snapped awake, and a dash of crimson colored his handsome face.

Unsure how he should face the man who was spooning him from behind, Mu Hanzhang closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep. But after waiting quite a length of time, with Jing Shao still showing no sign of waking up, Mu Hanzhang was worried that he might miss getting to court on time, and so he nudged the slumbering man with an elbow.

"Junqing…" Jing Shao let out a hum and hugged him even closer, nuzzling against his long, silky hair before returning to snoring gently.

"Your Highness, it's time to get up." Duofu had waited for a long time without hearing any sounds from inside the room and was forced to knock on the door.

Jing Shao hummed sleepily again. "I'm not going today." He seemed rather unhappy about being woken up.

"Things at court haven't been stable lately. Don't be a child," Mu Hanzhang said, and without any other way to rouse him, he pushed off the arm on his shoulder, then turned over to give him a shove.

Jing Shao reluctantly opened his eyes, and when he saw his consort's gently creased brow and tired but handsome face, he froze for a moment, before grinning sleepily. He pulled Mu Hanzhang back in to press a fresh kiss to those lightly swollen lips. "I'll go to court. You sleep a while longer."

Watching Jing Shao's grin practically split his face in half, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but shoot him a glare.

Jing Shao pressed another kiss to those irritably puffed-up cheeks before finally getting out of bed and dressing with a smile. As he was leaving, he didn't forget to tuck his wife back into bed and let down the bed veil before reluctantly leaving the inner chamber.

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"YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'RE IN a good mood today, Your Highness." Having run into him at the palace gates, Xiao Yuan was incapable of not commenting on the conspicuously smug look on Jiang Shao's face.

"Vice Minister Xiao!" Jing Shao yanked him over. "I really don't know how to thank you, so, how about this—let me treat you to drinks tomorrow!"

"Does that mean you've achieved your wish, Your Highness?" Xiao Yuan suddenly found that self-satisfied look on Jing Shao's face rather blinding.

"It's all thanks to those tricks you taught me. They really worked!" Jing Shao chuckled, nudging Vice Minister Xiao with an elbow, right where he was ticklish.

"Naturally, you can trust me on this!" Xiao Yuan laughed dryly, then added, "However, given the current climate, it would be unwise for Your Highness to bring that expression to court."

Hearing this, Jing Shao was suddenly jolted back to reality. First brother's fate was still uncertain, so he definitely shouldn't attend court smiling like a fool. He quickly thanked Xiao Yuan for the reminder, flattened his expression, and headed into the palace ahead of him.

Xiao Yuan looked somewhat wistfully at Jing Shao's back and breathed out a sigh. *When will my wife be as gentle and obedient as Princely Consort Cheng?* Quietly rubbing his sore lower back, Vice Minister Xiao snorted with discontent. Making him wear emerald green today was already letting him off easy—he should have been made to wear gosling yellow!

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MU HANZHANG OVERSLEPT and missed breakfast. His Highness had left instructions that the princely consort was not to be disturbed, so none of the servants in the east wing dared wake him.

With his face scrunched up like a wrinkled bun, Duofu dealt with all the stewards that came and went, handling the household affairs on behalf of the sleeping

princely consort.

At the same time, on this very day, the empress consort began her official selection of the fourth imperial consort, asking that the women of the capital's noble houses with unwed daughters take turns presenting their name plaques to request an audience. They were invited to a flower viewing, but in reality, it was a vetting process.

Trusting that the first impression was always the deepest, Marquise Beiwei was the first to submit her name plaque, taking her daughter to the palace on that very day, and Duchess Mao was equally proactive. Meanwhile, for some mysterious reason, the empress consort had actually asked both of them to come to the palace at the same time.

Jing Shao wanted to go home as soon as morning court was over, but his father summoned him to the imperial study where they examined the geography of Yunnan-Tibet for a while and analyzed the situation in Xinan.

"We heard you assigned two bodyguards to Jing Chen," Emperor Hongzheng said, suddenly changing the subject to the second prince who'd gone on a secret investigation in Xinan.

Jing Shao, restless with his longing to go home, was suddenly struck with a sharp chill. He lowered his eyes. "I noticed that there weren't many capable individuals around Second Brother, so I lent him a couple of bodyguards who are expert martial artists."

Emperor Hongzheng stared intently at him and slowly said, "Those exceptional skills made all the difference. We must richly reward them upon their return."

Jing Shao's pupils sharply contracted, and his head snapped up. "Father, Second Brother—has something happened to him?"

Chapter 32:
Put to the Test

"JING CHEN WAS ATTACKED on the southwestern border." Emperor Hongzheng took a confidential message off the table, watching him with inscrutable eyes.

"Second Brother—is he hurt?" Jing Shao asked, still in shock. Noting Emperor Hongzheng's calm demeanor, he realized that Jing Chen couldn't be in any mortal danger and only then managed to calm down a little.

Emperor Hongzheng closed his eyes and handed the letter to him. "See for yourself."

Quickly unfolding the thin sheet of paper, Jing Shao skimmed past the pleasantries and anxiously searched for any word that might give an idea of his brother's well-being.

...Thanks to the bodyguards given by third brother, who protected me with their lives, your son is unharmed and shall return to the capital soon... Finding this line, Jing Shao let out a sigh of relief. Then, he read the letter from the top before handing it back to his father.

The message suggested that a clearer picture of the tribute robbery had already emerged, but few words were spent on the assassination attempt itself. Knowing Jing Chen, since he'd been so vague, the incident must have been extremely precarious at the time.

Jing Shao slowly clenched his fist. If it was someone sent by King Xinan, he would certainly devise another plan now that this one had fallen through. Xinan was a thousand miles away from the capital, and there was no way to know what might happen along the way. His mind grew restless and tangled with worry.

"Father, a thousand miles is a vast distance, with many obstacles along the way. Your son dares to ask for permission to take some troops to support Second Brother." Jing Shao spoke earnestly from the floor, still on his knees.

"Jing Chen already said that he's fine. You may rise." Emperor Hongzheng sat back down, picked a memorial up off the table and began to annotate it.

"Father!" Jing Shao refused to rise. It wasn't just that King Xinan tended to be thorough and would try to finish the job; now that this had happened, any assassin could try to take advantage of the situation—because King Xinan would be the one to take the fall anyhow.

After a long moment, Emperor Hongzheng looked at Jing Shao, who was still kneeling, and sighed in resignation. "We've already sent people!"

Relief surged through Jing Shao. Those fifty soldiers he'd sent to protect his elder brother must still have been trailing him, and they'd surely reveal themselves after this incident. Coupled with the men his father had sent, unless King Xinan was to send troops after them in an outright military pursuit, he probably wouldn't be in further danger.

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ONCE OUTSIDE the imperial study, Jing Shao ran into Emperor Hongzheng's personal chief eunuch Anxian, accompanied by a young eunuch carrying tea as if they had just come from the tea room. Upon seeing Jing Shao, they immediately bowed in greeting.

"Eunuch Anxian." Jing Shao smiled politely. "Even after all these years, you're still so hands-on."

"His Majesty's daily routine and meals must be handled with the utmost care. I feel I cannot trust these clumsy kids with everything, so I keep a constant eye on them. Ah, but it is a little embarrassing." Perhaps because he was constantly worrying, Anxian wasn't portly like most eunuchs, and his strides were powerful and full of vigor.

There were many prying eyes outside the imperial study, making it difficult to inquire on anything important, so Jing Shao left after only a few pleasantries.

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"HE'S ALREADY NEARLY TWENTY, but he doesn't use his brains for anything but basic military strategy," Emperor Hongzheng said, taking a sip of the tea Anxian had brewed.

Anxian carefully checked the expression on the Emperor's face before smiling and saying, "Isn't His Highness's candid nature precisely what Your Majesty is so fond of?"

Emperor Hongzheng set down his teacup, his lips curling into a faint smile. "At least he truly values loyalty and brotherhood." He hadn't told Jing Shao that the assassins had all committed suicide after failing to kill Jing Chen, leaving them with no leads. If today, Jing Shao had begun by asking who'd tried to assassinate Jing Chen, then he would have remained a suspect. Fortunately, this son of his never disappointed. Although he often threw tantrums like a child, he'd never harbored malicious intent toward his brothers.

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AS JING SHAO EXITED the palace gates, he noticed two carriages heading toward the side gate. He surmised that women must have been entering the palace, but he paid no mind to them and rode Shadow back to his estate.

Those two carriages were from the House of Beiwei and the House of Mao.

"I heard my idiot son injured your heir the day before yesterday. Is he better now?" giggled Duchess Mao. There wasn't the slightest hint of apology on her face.

“It happened many days ago—don’t tell me you only found out the day before yesterday?” Marquise Beiwei looked at her coldly. The heir of Duke Mao had injured Mu Lingbao in a fight, and he’d only given a verbal apology. After so long, they hadn’t even bothered to send over a servant to check on him—they were clearly just pushing them around.

The two were verbally at each other’s throats the moment they saw each other, and the two young ladies standing behind them were also quietly sizing each other up. When the palace maid sent to greet them by the empress saw this, she lowered her gaze and remained silent.

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By the time Jing Shao got back to his estate, it hadn’t even reached High Noon. As soon as he stepped inside the east wing, Duofu greeted him with a sour expression. “Your Highness, His Highness hasn’t awoken yet. I didn’t dare let anyone disturb him.”

Seeing his pale, chubby face all bunched up with stress, Jing Shao couldn’t help but poke fun at him. “Didn’t you use to manage household affairs yourself? What’s that face about?”

“Your Highness, you have no idea. Right now, this household is so meticulously managed by His Highness that every moment is accounted for. Compared to how things were before, the daily items that need to be handled have more than doubled; I get a headache just looking at the list.”

Duofu was truly impressed by the princely consort. There was so much to account for financially every day, and so many tasks to check off, yet he was able to organize everything, sometimes spotting discrepancies at a single glance. None of the stewards fudged their reports anymore, so they were all extremely detailed. After dealing with them all morning, he felt completely overwhelmed.

“You’ve just gotten used to lazing around, that’s all. Look at Anxian—he’s way more fit than you are.” By then, Jing Shao was already at the bedchamber door. He put up a hand to stop Duofu’s complaining and quietly pushed the door open.

The windows in the bedchamber were closed, making it much darker than it was out in the hall. The light-blue bed veil was tightly closed, and he couldn’t glimpse the beautiful sight hidden within.

Jing Shao changed out of his court attire and slowly parted the bed veil. The man in the bed slept peacefully, with one arm resting outside the brocade quilt, exposing half a shoulder. His fair skin was marked all over with love bites, and he looked rather tempting. Climbing into the bed, Jing Shao tucked his slightly chilled arm back under the quilt and lay down beside him, pulling both the man and the quilt into his arms before pressing a kiss to that handsome sleeping face.

Mu Hanzhang’s brow creased, and then his misty, beautiful eyes opened. “You’re back…” he said in a hoarse voice, tinged with the nasal quality of someone who’d just awoken. Jing Shao found it adorable.

Stealing a kiss from those still-swollen lips, Jing Shao pulled Mu Hanzhang close to him. “Do you still feel bad?”

Lucidity slowly overtook grogginess, and Mu Hanzhang found that his fatigue had faded, but there was still some soreness in his lower back. He looked up at the man holding him, then rested his head on top of Jing Shao's shoulder, finding it a comfortable place to settle. "My lower back is a bit sore."

Jing Shao froze for a moment. Was Junqing trying to…get him to dote on him? Having realized this, Jing Shao sat up a little bit so that his consort could lie sprawled on his chest while he massaged his lower back.

With a large, strong hand rubbing him through the quilt with just the right amount of pressure, the waves of soreness were alleviated, and he began to feel quite good. Mu Hanzhang was so comfortable that he nearly shut his eyes, his lips curling into a smile out of Jing Shao's view.

"There was an assassination attempt on Brother." Jing Shao caught Mu Hanzhang up to date as he massaged him. "Do you think King Xinan might be behind it?"

Mu Hanzhang frowned, and after a moment of quiet pondering, he said, "No."

"Why is that?" On the way back, Jing Shao had carefully thought through what had happened at this time in his previous life. He'd been fighting the Southern Barbarians in Yunnan-Tibet at the time, but he'd been kept informed of all the major events that happened at court. He had no recollection of any assassination on an imperial envoy.

"The tribute robbery was suspicious to begin with. The reason King Xinan brazenly used that excuse was because he was already aware of the situation in Yunnan-Tibet." Mu Hanzhang looked down, saying, "He only wants to reduce the amount of tribute he's required to send. He doesn't wish to start a war."

Jing Shao pieced together recent events, and his massaging paused as he suddenly realized something. Because Xinan was close to Yunnan-Tibet, King Xinan was more aware of the situation in the Southern Territories than most. He knew that once the imperial court started a campaign there, the government would likely call on him to send troops as reinforcements. And so, wanting to give as little as possible, King Xinan first found an excuse to delay his tribute, so that if the court were to ask him for troops, he could bring up reducing the tribute as a condition. If the court didn't ask him for troops, then he'd simply belatedly send the tribute.

If it hadn't been King Xinan who ordered the assassination, but rather one of Jing Shao's two other brothers trying to take advantage of the situation, then this whole problem could be easily resolved. As long as Jing Chen left Xinan, it would become difficult for them to frame someone else for the attempt, so they wouldn't risk doing it again. However…

If Junqing could see this from the outside, then his father must have had an even clearer picture. The reason Father had summoned him to the imperial study today must have been… Jing Shao broke out in a cold sweat. Father had been testing him!

Noticing his bitter smile, Mu Hanzhang couldn't help but feel bad for him. "With what you said today, Father will definitely not suspect you."

Lowering his head to meet eyes full of worry for him, Jing Shao moved in closer to kiss him on his beautiful eyelids. "I'm fine." A father who was an emperor was always emperor first and a father second! He'd been at a disadvantage his entire past life; this time around, he was much more aware of his situation.

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THE NEXT DAY, the Beiwei Estate sent a delivery of Hami melons, imported from the northwest.

"To think that Marquise Beiwei would send us Hami melons—what a rare occasion."

Jing Shao picked up a slice of the sweet fruit. These melons from the northwest ripened earlier in the season, were larger than those grown in the Central Plains, and were also quite sweet. Marquis Beiwei's military authority was in the northwest, and he'd bought a lot of land there to grow melons and fruits.

"The servant who delivered the melons said that Mother hasn't stopped smiling since she got back from the palace yesterday." Mu Hanzhang handed him a bamboo skewer. When he brought up his shameless principal mother, he couldn't help letting out a light snort of disdain.

The empress had granted the young lady from the Mu clan a pair of jade bangles, but she had only gifted an embroidered coin purse to the young lady from the House of Mao. Lady Du was confident that her daughter was at the top of the running for the position of the fourth imperial consort. While she'd still been in a good mood, Hami melons from the northwest had arrived, so she'd sent some over.

"How did you know all that?" Junqing asked, looking pointedly at Jing Shao's sticky, damp fingertips. Jing Shao quickly wiped his hands and began to eat with the bamboo skewer.

"My Third Aunt is such a gossip that I'm afraid everyone in the Beiwei Estate knows by now." Mu Hanzhang heaved a sigh. The servant who delivered the melons was friendly with Lanting, so they'd discussed the entire thing in detail. At this rate, within three days, everyone in the capital would know that Miss Mu would soon be the fourth imperial consort.

"Your Third Aunt is quite the character. Next time we need to spread rumors about Jing Yu, we'll ask her to do it!" Jing Yu couldn't help snickering—this third madam must have had something against Marquise Beiwei.

"You're talking nonsense again." Mu Hanzhang shook his head helplessly. Reflecting on it more, though, he wondered if Third Aunt really might be doing it intentionally. If Mu Suzhi actually married the fourth Prince, then at most, people might simply call the Marquise Beiwei a show-off, but if she didn't manage to marry him, this would cause a lot of embarrassment for the House of Beiwei!

Chapter 33:
Stance

TWO DAYS LATER, after many subtle congratulations from various visiting noble ladies, Marquise Beiwei realized that the news had spread across the capital! Exasperated, yet unable to do anything else, she summoned third madam to her house and gave her a good scolding.

"Sister-in-law, this isn't my fault!" Third madam wept and wailed, her voice shrill. "I was just happy for Suzhi, that's all! The only people I brought it up with were the young maids who serve me, and besides, I wasn't the only person who was there, so why are you only blaming me?"

"How dare you say that! I've told you a thousand times to keep your mouth shut on this matter—even if it seems certain, there's always a chance it might not work out! But you spread the news immediately, as if you wanted to be sure every single last person in the capital knew!"

Marquise Beiwei was so mad that she was shaking. Whether the match succeeded or not, she was doomed to embarrass herself. Plus, if the empress found out, she might believe their house was greedy and shallow and consequently disapprove of Suzhi. Then the match might genuinely fall through.

Third madam stopped crying, and her demeanor frosted over. "Even though I made a mistake, you're not allowed to scold me like a concubine, surely?!" There was no inherent hierarchy between sisters-in-law, and she just couldn't stand that smug look on Lady Du's face. Her husband was also a legitimate son of the former Marquis Beiwei, so why should Suzhi get to marry a son of the emperor, and not her own daughter?

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SETTING ASIDE the recent pandemonium, a few days later, when Duke Mao's daughter reentered the palace, all hell broke loose in the Beiwei Estate. It had turned out that inside the coin purse the empress had granted her was a jade token that permitted entry to the palace.

"Marquis Beiwei's common-born son was already married to Prince Cheng, yet they still dreamed of marrying their daughter to the fourth prince. What on earth made them so confident?" said Duchess Mao to Countess Yongchang.

"She was worried that the common-born son was too smart and posed a threat to the heir, so she was in a big hurry to marry off her daughter. Now look at her. She's built a fire under herself!" laughed Countess Yongchang. "From now on, our families are going to be even closer than before."

"Right! I'll have even more reasons to visit you and play cards!" Duchess Mao also laughed. Earl Yongchang was the empress's brother, and with Duke Mao's daughter engaged to the fourth prince, the two clans were now essentially tied

together.

They'd met today because Marquise Dingnan's peonies had bloomed, and she had invited the wives of many noble houses to a flower viewing party at her home.

"Why isn't Du-jiejie here?" Marquise Dingnan had married Marquis Dingnan after he became a widower, so she was younger than most of the other noble ladies.

"Well, she's, uh—she probably won't be going anywhere for a while," said Countess Yongchang, holding a handkerchief over her mouth to cover up her laugh. "Has the second imperial consort come home to see her parents lately?"

Marquise Dingnan smiled and said, "She's very busy with her estate at the moment, so I didn't ask her to come today." Aware that they were just trying to get information on the second prince, Marquise Dingnan didn't intend to elaborate on the private matters of her house and deftly changed the subject.

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EVER SINCE MU HANZHANG had realized that Duofu was capable of handling the household affairs, he had begun to gradually pass on those responsibilities. Jing Shao, having had a taste of sweet intimacy, was even more insatiable than before, pestering his consort every night until Mu Hanzhang was completely overwhelmed, at which point he would allow him to recover for a few days. Duofu was forced to face a pack of wolfish, ruthless stewards every day with his crinkled doughy face.

"Elder Brother won't have traveled in the dark, so he might not even arrive in the capital until nightfall." Mu Hanzhang helped Jing Shao fasten his vambraces, and seeing the anxious expression on his face, he sighed. "At least have some breakfast before you go."

Jing Chen was coming back today, just in time for Imperial Leave, the sanctioned day off for rest and bathing, so there was no morning court. Since he was coming back from the southwest, he'd likely pass through the southern part of the city. Jing Shao decided to take a detour to survey that patch of overgrown woodland in the eastern outskirts, but since Jing Chen had still been in the neighboring province just yesterday, he wouldn't be returning until later today.

Reaching out to straighten the tassels on his consort's headpiece, Jing Shao smiled and said, "All right, I'll go after I've eaten."

"Then I'll go by the Beiwei Estate today. Father sent a message a few days ago asking me to visit in the next couple of days whenever I have time." He hadn't been able to go yesterday as Jing Shao had messed around during nap time, which caused him to sleep all afternoon. When he thought of this, he couldn't help but give Jing Shao a withering look.

Jing Shao had no idea why he was being glared at, and so he lowered his head and lightly bit Mu Hanzhang's ear.

Stifling a moan, Mu Hanzhang pushed him away immediately and flicked a look around the room before breathing a sigh of relief. Thankfully, Jing Shao's predilection for dressing his consort meant he regularly ran all the handmaidens out of their rooms.

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JING SHAO RODE SHADOW to the eastern outskirts, easily bypassing layers of scattered stones and brushwood, and entered the depths of the overgrown forest. There, a group of soldiers was using hoes and hammers to level the ground. There weren't that many of them—twenty or thirty at most—so the progress was quite slow.

"Your Highness." Seeing Jing Shao, Ren Feng put down the great iron hammer he was using and went over to him. "We're short on manpower. I'm not even sure we'll finish leveling out the amount of land you've demarcated by the end of the year."

"There's no rush." Jing Shao dismounted, climbed onto a high rock, and scanned the wild thicket that surrounded them. "Don't disturb those trees." After saying so, he leapt off the rock and returned to his horse.

"Certainly." Ren Feng reached out a hand to help him mount, but Jing Shao didn't take it.

His gaze swept over the personal imperial guards working with their heads down, and he said in a low voice, "If anyone so much as breathes a word about this, they're to be executed without mercy!"

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ONCE HE'D SEEN OFF Jing Shao, Mu Hanzhang left for the Beiwei Estate. As soon as he stepped inside, he noticed that something was off; all of the servants had their heads bowed and their eyes lowered, and they were unusually quiet. The steward took him straight to Marquis Beiwei's study, where his father Mu Jin was vigorously writing, drawing big lines with forceful brush strokes that were all but piercing through paper. Mu Hanzhang found he was filling the page with the word "resilience."

"Father, have you run into some difficulty?" Mu Hanzhang asked, carefully observing each of the brushstrokes on the page, perceiving struggles and turmoil in the writer's heart.

"You can tell?" Mu Jin looked up at him.

Lowering his gaze, Mu Hanzhang replied, "Father, you have always been resolute. You're only hesitating this time because what you're considering now is too significant."

Mu Jin placed his brush in the brush basin and sighed. "You've always been wise beyond your years and able to see things with clarity. This time, your father was just too greedy."

"I'd originally assumed that when you decided to marry me to Prince Chen, you had already made your decision." Mu Hanzhang rolled up the calligraphy scroll his father had been using and set out a new sheet of white paper. "The battle for

succession has always been a fight to the death. How can there ever be a way to satisfy both sides?" He took another brush off its holder, dipped it in ink, and respectfully presented it to his father with both hands.

Mu Jin stared at the proffered item for a long while before taking it, and then he laughed heartily. "How can there be a way to satisfy both sides? Well said!" He raised his brush and set it to the paper. This time, he didn't hesitate; the word "resolute" swiftly appeared in the span of one breath.

The selection process of the fourth imperial consort had completely set the House of Beiwei and the House of Mao against each other, with the empress using this as an opportunity to harshly humiliate the House of Beiwei and to put pressure on Duke Mao, who maintained a centrist position. It had taken Mu Jin until now to realize that when the empress personally chose his common-born son as Prince Cheng's princely consort, she had already abandoned the House of Beiwei. But alas, he had failed to see the truth.

"I plan to officially elevate Concubine Qiu to secondary wife next month." Mu Jin set down his brush and looked up at his second son. "The concubine in the Prince Cheng Estate is a legitimate-born daughter of the vice-minister of war. As the primary wife, you should have a higher social status."

Mu Hanzhang was taken aback, never having expected Mu Jin to have considered his position. Even though he knew that there were political motivations behind Marquis Beiwei's decision, he still couldn't help but feel a little moved. He bowed. "Thank you, Father, for being so considerate of me. And thank you in advance, on behalf of Concubine Qiu."

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SHADOW RAN SO FAST that Jing Shao reached the pavilion ten miles south of the city in no time at all. Now inside it, he sat idly plucking grass to feed Shadow and had to wait until dusk before he saw a teal carriage slowly approaching from afar.

Jing Shao immediately mounted Shadow and galloped over, speeding around the front of the carriage and startling the coachman. The second prince's bodyguards swiftly drew their blades. "Who goes there—Your Highness!"

Jing Shao waved at them. "Why are you only just getting here now?"

"His Highness is injured, and we dare not travel too fast," a bodyguard explained.

With a frown, Jing Shao hopped onto the carriage and quickly slipped inside. As soon as he got a look at the situation, a rage ignited within him. "Brother!"

Jing Chen was leaning against the wall of the carriage, wrapped in layers of white bandages that encompassed him from shoulder to waist. He frowned at the sight of Jing Shao. "I told you not to come greet me. Why don't you ever listen?!"

Chapter 34:
Joy of Union

"HOW CAN YOU ACT like nothing's wrong when you're hurt this badly?!" Frowning anxiously, Jing Shao reached out toward the bandages, wanting to check on his brother's injuries. But his fingers hovered inches away from the cloth; he was too afraid he might hurt him to get any closer.

Jing Chen had never seen his brother so cautious before, and he found his habitually stern expression cracking. The rebuke that was already on the tip of his tongue became stuck in his throat.

He reached out awkwardly and ruffled Jing Shao's hair. "It's really not that bad. The wound's just long and hard to bandage, which is why it's wrapped like this."

Jing Shao was stunned. From what he could recall, this was the most affectionate his brother had ever been with him. By the time he was running around climbing trees to rummage through birds' nests and fishing for koi with his bare hands, his brother was already solemn and spent all day in the study.

The phrase he heard most from Jing Chen was "What a disgrace." When their mother died, he cried his heart out, but all his brother did was kneel in front of the coffin, eyes dry and mouth closed. Tugging on his brother's sleeve only got him a *"You're such a useless thing—all you do is cry…"* Thus, in his past life, he had always assumed that his brother didn't much care for him.

That was until his brother had come to visit him in prison. Jing Shao could still remember that steady, powerful voice as though it were yesterday. *"You are my only little brother. Even if I have to give up everything I have, I'm never going to let you die!"*

As the past replayed itself in his mind, Jing Shao felt his nose prickling. If he hadn't lived another life, he would have never known how much his brother did for him without his knowledge. Jing Shao rubbed the tip of his nose with a finger, then he dug a small green jade bottle out of his pocket and put it in Jing Chen's hand. "The ride is pretty bumpy, so when you get back, go ask sister-in-law to put this on for you."

Jing Chen looked at the small bottle in his hand and frowned. It was made of green jade and had probably been granted to Jing Shao before he set off on his previous military expedition. "This is a life-saving ointment. My wound is merely a superficial injury—take it back." Though he attempted to return it, Jing Shao had already retreated to the carriage's door.

"I have more; you hold on to this one. If you can't bear to use it, just carry it on you—it'll put my mind at ease," said Jing Shao as he raised the curtain to leave. "I rode around the capital in a huge circle before heading here, so it's likely no one is aware of our meeting. As for Father, the old man knows everything anyway. There's no point trying to hide it from him."

Holding the small green jade bottle in his hand, Jing Chen looked on as his brother gracefully mounted his horse with perfect posture, and with a light shake of the reins, he was gone. Slowly, he smiled. His Li'l Shao-er really was getting more

and more mature by the day.

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EVEN IF THE BEIWEI ESTATE was Mu Hanzhang's family home, it wasn't appropriate for them to keep the princely consort for dinner, so by the time Jing Shao returned home, Mu Hanzhang was already there. The table was laid with a sumptuous spread, and his consort, dressed in soft silk loungewear, was sitting at the dining table, waiting for him to come dine with him. Having someone waiting for him to come home was such a wonderful feeling that Jing Shao found himself leaning forward to plant a kiss on that handsome face.

All the handmaidens around them looked away carefully when they saw this.

That same handsome face turned red in a flash—they were surrounded by servants, yet this man just had no shame. Mu Hanzhang had to glare at him again. "Clean up and get changed—your mouth is full of dirt!" It was only once he'd said it that he realized his remark was inappropriate and that it sounded like his only complaint had been Jing Shao's cleanliness. He was left to silently berate himself.

Jing Shao stifled his laughter into his fist before visiting the bathroom to wash his face and change his clothes.

The weather at the end of the Fifth Month was already getting hot. Jing Shao took the cup Miaoxi handed him and gulped it down all at once.

After ladling Jing Shao a bowl of cold mung bean soup, Mu Han-zhang dismissed the handmaidens. "Did you get to see Elder Brother?"

Jing Shao accepted the food, took a sip, and nodded. "He's injured, so the carriage took a bit longer to get here."

"Is he hurt badly?" Mu Hanzhang asked, concerned.

Jing Shao took a bite of a dish and found the taste to his liking, so he picked a bit up with his chopsticks and put some in Mu Hanzhang's bowl as well. "It's nothing serious. Shouldn't be that big of a deal."

Mu Hanzhang looked at the food that had been added to his bowl, then back up at Jing Shao, and since Jing Shao was acting as though serving him was perfectly natural, Mu Hanzhang said nothing and ate it. It wasn't as though it was some rare thing for Prince Cheng to wait on him, but every time this happened he found himself silently grateful that this person didn't treat him like a woman he could order around and had instead respected and cherished him. He didn't dare imagine what life would have been like if Jing Shao acted like other husbands.

Adhering to the etiquette of not speaking while they ate, Mu Hanzhang stopped talking and focused on the meal. Jing Shao had only eaten two pieces of braised beef for lunch, so now he was well and truly hungry. He picked up his bowl and started shoveling the contents into his mouth.

Mu Hanzhang was a little startled to see him so ravenous. As Jing Shao picked up his third bowl of rice, he raised a hand to stop him before he overate and gave himself a stomachache. Jing Shao looked longingly at the rice, and Mu Hanzhang said with a mixture of amusement and frustration, "You're eating too fast to know

whether you're full yet. Eating too much in the evening will give you indigestion."

They were both men, so all the rice bowls in the east wing held a lot of the grain. Usually, Jing Shao was quite full after two bowls, but he was currently eating too fast to notice. If he partook in this third bowl, he wouldn't be able to fall asleep later.

Jing Shao followed this reasoning, and so he obediently set down his chopsticks, and instead drank another small half bowl of mung bean soup. It wasn't until the handmaidens arrived to clear the table that he started feeling overfull. Mu Hanzhang sighed, and once they'd had their tea, accompanied him for a walk out in the garden so Jing Shao's dinner could digest.

There was a slight warmth in the late spring breeze, and as it brushed against his face, he smelled a lingering hint of sunbaked warmth amid the scent of flowers.

"Father said that he is going to elevate Concubine Qiu to be his secondary wife." As Mu Hanzhang said this, he stopped beneath a union tree and looked up. It was covered in pink silk flowers, delicate and numerous, like embroidered smoke.

"That's wonderful! Soon, you'll be able to call her Mom." Jing Shao leapt up, having seen his consort gazing at the flowers, and plucked a bunch of silklike union flowers from the tree to hand to him.

"They're in full bloom—why'd you pick them?" Mu Hanzhang looked at the flowers Jing Shao was offering him but didn't take them.

"Pepper blossoms for a fair beauty," said Jing Shao proudly.

Mu Hanzhang glared at the prince and his never-ending exhibition of inappropriate behavior. "This is the first time I've ever heard of a 'heartbreak bloom' being gifted."

Jing Shao scratched his head. The union tree's flowers were referred to as "the heartbreak bloom," for their blooming supposedly foretold a husband's infidelity, which was indeed an unfavorable connotation. He immediately tossed that bunch of flowers and pulled down a branch with leaves on it, stuffing it in Junqing's hand instead.

"And what's this all about? It's one thing to give flowers, but who gifts another leaves?" Mu Hanzhang rotated the branch studded with green leaves, their fernlike leaves folded inward. There wasn't anything pretty about it, so he couldn't help but laugh.

"The leaves of the union tree part during the day and reunite at night, symbolizing requited love. I'm giving it to you because I wish for our hearts to be united for life, in joyful union for all eternity," stated Jing Shao confidently.

Surprised, Mu Hanzhang looked down at the leaves he'd been given, folded close against each other; he hadn't expected this from Jing Shao and was momentarily unsure how to answer. A blush quietly crept across his handsome face, which was even more beautiful under the bright light of the moon.

Jing Shao stared, entranced, and was compelled to embrace him, to seek out those thin lips with his own.

Mu Hanzhang let out a soft noise but didn't resist. Those words had filled his heart until it was brimming over, and he wanted to respond to the intimacy, just to prolong this feeling a bit longer.

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THE NEXT DAY, Second Prince Jing Chen returned to court, standing, injured, in the Grand Hall. Emperor Hongzheng took pity on the still-wounded second prince and granted him a seat.

Once updated regarding the assassination attempt on an imperial envoy, the emperor became furious and ordered an investigation. Additionally, Jing Chen brought startling news that shook the court and everyone else who heard—the tribute from Xinan hadn't actually been stolen by bandits but had been seized by King Xinan himself. The entire tribute was still currently being held at the border of the Xinan Fiefdom near the highway leading to the capital!

Whether through coincidence or intent, King Xinan's memorial making excuses for not rescuing the first prince had also arrived in the capital yesterday. He stated in his memorial that the drought Xinan had suffered this spring caused many places to yield not even a single grain of rice, and the plunder of their tribute only worsened the situation. Apparently, even King Xinan's estate had had to reduce their spending to aid the populace, so they truly didn't have the military capacity to mobilize in Yunnan-Tibet. With this in mind, he entreated the government to first allocate provisions.

"Outrageous!" Emperor Hongzheng slammed Jing Chen's and King Xinan's memorials together, then tossed them both onto the marble steps.

"The audacity of this King Xinan!" An upright censor of the Censorate, Fan Jie, stepped forward, trembling with rage.

Subtly exchanging a glance with Jing Chen, the minister of war stepped forward to remind them, "Your Majesty, please quell your anger. The most urgent matter right now is that the first prince is still in Yunnan-Tibet, his fate uncertain. Since King Xinan refused to send troops, we must quickly gather forces from elsewhere and rush to rescue him."

The vice-minister of war, Song An, quickly stepped forward to add, "It is only because King Xinan knows that the first prince is unskilled in the art of war that he dares openly deceive the imperial court and coerce us for a reduction in tribute. In this one's opinion, a general of great renown should be sent to Yunnan-Tibet." Then, he shot a meaningful glance in Jing Shao's direction.

That Song An had once again decided to act without consulting him made Jing Shao's teeth itch with irritation. He quietly took a half step back.

Marquis Beiwei, who seldom spoke at court, suddenly took a step forward, and his calm, powerful voice immediately silenced the crowd. "There aren't that many Southern Barbarians—it's not even worth making this big of a fuss over it. The only reason the first prince fell into such peril in the first place was because he's unfamiliar with the local environment and the terrain. This one believes that all we must do is rescue the first prince, and there's no need to send a well-known general for that. All it takes to overcome them is time."

Emperor Hongzheng glanced at Mu Jin and gave a slight nod. The Marquis Beiwei of this generation had spent many years stationed in the northwest in his youth and fought numerous battles. He had secured his peerage through his own

skills, not by birth, and thus his words carried considerable weight.

And so, Emperor Hongzheng issued his decree, reprimanding King Xinan and ordering him to dispatch troops to rescue the first prince at once. His requests of provisions and reduction of tribute were rejected outright! At the same time, troops were dispatched from the land of Shu to carry out the rescue from another direction.

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MU LINGBAO, whose house arrest had just ended, rushed to the main house in a frenzy. “Mother, I heard Father is going to elevate Concubine Qiu to secondary wife!”

“He is!” Marquise Beiwei looked even more haggard than before. The emperor had decreed that Duke Mao’s daughter would be the fourth imperial consort, and the betrothal was to be finalized in the Sixth Month. The Seventh Month was inauspicious for weddings, and so the wedding day was set for the Eighth Month instead. Having become the laughingstock of the entire capital, Lady Du was so embarrassed that she hadn’t dared leave the house for almost a month.

Marquis Beiwei was elevating Lady Qiu the same month as the fourth prince’s engagement. It was his clear message to everyone was that the House of Beiwei would be siding with Prince Cheng; from now on, they would all have to revere that common-born son.

“That will never do!” Mu Lingbao flung the fruit tray off the table. “If he makes her a secondary wife, Mu Hanzhang is going to be semi-legitimate—if I die, he can inherit the title!”

“You’re speaking nonsense!” Marquise Beiwei smacked Mu Lingbao on the back. “You are the heir as stated in an imperial edict. No one can take this peerage from you! He’s already married to Prince Cheng, so how could he come back to his birth family to inherit the title?!”

After getting slapped by his mother, Mu Lingbao threw himself onto the daybed with a thud and raised his voice. “If Prince Cheng becomes the emperor and divorces him, wouldn’t he be able to inherit the title then?!”

“Hmph, if Prince Cheng aspires to be the emperor, do you really think that commoner would live to see his ascension ceremony?” Marquise Beiwei sneered. A son of the emperor who married a man could not inherit the throne, so even if Prince Cheng somehow managed to seize it through extraordinary means, it would be disgraceful to keep his gentleman wife around, so naturally he’d have to erase him from the history books.

Mu Lingbao briefly paused, then became delighted. “Mother, you really are clever!”

“If you only ever showed just the slightest bit of promise, do you think I’d have to resort to such means?!” Marquise Beiwei jabbed his forehead hard with her finger.

Lady Qiu, who had come to deliver a ledger, stood frozen outside the door, covered in a cold sweat.

Chapter 35:
Speculations

CONCUBINE QIU glanced left and right, and she noticed that Yanhong, the senior handmaiden that the Marquise had sent away to fetch tea, was just returning from the other end of the winding corridor. She immediately took two steps back and ducked behind a pillar, waiting until the handmaiden was by the door before stepping back out.

"Concubine Qiu, you're here to deliver the ledger?" Yanhong adopted a smile as soon as she saw her, for Concubine Qiu was going to be Madam Qiu by next month, so everyone in the estate was acting much more courteous toward her. "The young master is still inside, so I can bring it in for you."

"Thank you," Concubine Qiu said and handed the ledger to her with a smile before turning to leave.

The two people inside stopped talking as soon as they heard the handmaiden's voice. Once Yanhong stepped inside, Lady Du asked, "Yanhong, who was outside?"

"Just as I got to the door, I happened to run into Concubine Qiu as she came to deliver the ledger, so I stopped her from entering," Yanhong said, smiling, as she placed the ledger on the table.

Marquise Beiwei frowned. She had told Concubine Qiu to review the month's ledger in the side parlor, but once she'd made all the handmaidens leave the room, she'd forgotten all about her. Good thing Yanhong had returned in time.

She sent Yanhong outside to guard the door before looking up at Mu Lingbao again, saying, "You're not a kid anymore; even your son's old enough to run around now. Stop spending all your time in brothels with those worthless troublemaker friends of yours! If you have nothing to do, at least practice your martial arts so you won't embarrass yourself again when you get into a fight with that heir of Duke Mao's!"

"That wasn't my fault! That grandson of a turtle fought dirty!" Mu Lingbao retorted. "What's there to be afraid of? That brat Hanzhang can't learn martial arts anyway, so even my least efforts would still be better than his!"

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WHEN CONCUBINE QIU got back to her little courtyard house, she felt both distraught and confused. She had initially thought that if His Highness was treating Hanzhang well and his life had improved from how it was at the Beiwei Estate, she would be satisfied. But she had forgotten all about the struggles for the throne! Even toddlers in the capital knew how brave and skillful in battle Prince Cheng was, so would a man like that really be satisfied with the title of a mere imperial prince for the rest of his life? Especially when he had to be an imperial prince without legitimate heirs, whose descendants could not inherit his title.

She wanted to discuss this with her son, but alas, she was a concubine who couldn't leave the inner quarters. Lady Qiu heaved a sigh and summoned her handmaiden, Yancui, instructing her to get a letter to The Ink Lotus.

"But that shop of Second Young Master's… It sells fragrant balm. How am I supposed to walk in there?" Yancui's face turned red immediately.

Concubine Qiu shot a glare at the babbling girl. "If I was asking you to do that, you'd need to be able to leave this estate first! Just hand it to the third son of the Wangs who drives the cart. You don't have to worry about the rest."

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THE INVESTIGATION into the attack on Jing Chen in Xinan had come to a standstill. The Court of Judicial Review had determined that the identity of the assassin was likely one from the criminal underground, the kind that would throw away their life for money. But Jing Chen had traveled incognito, and only the few bodyguards at his side were aware of his whereabouts, four of whom had been assigned to him by His Majesty, while the other two were under Prince Cheng's command. Although no one at court was saying it out loud, they all suspected that the attempted assassination on the second prince must have had something to do with Prince Cheng!

"In hindsight, it's incredibly suspicious how Prince Cheng insisted on assigning two bodyguards to you!" said Master Chen, a resident scholar in the second prince's estate, in a most earnest way.

Jing Chen, who was sitting behind his desk at home recovering from his injuries, furrowed his brow at these words. "There is no need for that. Jing Shao would never harm me."

"Your Highness! The bond between brothers in an imperial family is as thin as paper. Even if he is your brother, you can't trust him completely! Prince Cheng has distinguished himself on the battlefield, and to have been forced to take a man as his wife, he must feel some discontent. This one hears that he shows great favor for his princely consort in front of others, which makes entirely no sense! Do tell this one, if Your Highness was the one who was robbed of your right to inherit the throne, could you remain as serene as he?" Master Chen persisted.

"That's enough!" Jing Chen slammed the cup he was holding onto the table heavily. "Do not bring up these baseless speculations about Jing Shao again!"

Once he'd dismissed his host of chattering aides, Jing Chen rubbed his temples wearily, then picked up a brush and began to write a memorial.

The second imperial consort, Lady Xiao, came in with a bowl of cooling tea to soothe the summer heat, and after dithering for a moment, she couldn't help saying, "Your Highness, Master Chen and the other aides are simply looking out for you. It isn't terrible to be a bit cautious."

"Matters of the court don't involve you—why are you butting in?" Jing Chen shot her a look, unwilling to speak further with her. Lady Xiao would never understand how much he treasured his little brother, and he'd repeated himself often enough to find it tiresome to explain it to her again. A woman's insight was limited;

there was much she would never understand even if he explained it to her.

Nevertheless, if even his resident advisors were starting to suspect Jing Shao, a great number must also suspect him at court. The furrow between Jing Chen's brows grew deeper and deeper; no matter who had done this, they were truly cunning indeed. If they had managed to kill him, that would have been their ideal scenario, and if they hadn't, they could conveniently frame Jing Shao for the attempt. Whether it tarnished Prince Cheng's reputation or turned the brothers against each other, they would win either way.

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"PURSUING THE MATTER of the assassination attempt any further will only disadvantage you." Early in the morning, Mu Hanzhang fastened Jing Shao's jade-trimmed belt over his court attire and worriedly instructed him, "If anyone targets you today, just uphold the principle of filial piety and yell at them. By no means should you try to refute them with reason. These are civil officials; you can't out-argue them." He knew Jing Shao had had to put up with unjustified suspicion over the past few days, and though Mu Hanzhang felt bad for him, he could only persuade him to swallow his anger for the time being.

"I'm just so angry—Jing Yu was most likely the one behind it! Are we just going to let him get away with it?" Jing Shao asked indignantly. It was obvious Father knew this, but there was still no evidence, and words alone couldn't prove anything.

"Even if it was the fourth prince's doing, fratricide is a grave crime, so if they dared go this far, they must have been fully prepared." Mu Hanzhang let out a sigh before he continued, "If your elder brother wishes to protect you, he will submit a memorial to Father asking him not to pursue this matter for the time being. You just need to remember not to act on impulse."

Jing Shao reluctantly started to walk out, but before even managing to take two steps, he turned back and buried his face into his consort's shoulder, his arms hanging loose at his sides. "It's so annoying! I don't want to go today!"

Mu Hanzhang helplessly looked down at the large man hanging off of him, then patted him on the back. "Don't be a child. Run along." Jing Shao made sad whining noises and refused to move. Noticing that it was getting late and worried he might not get there on time, Mu Hanzhang gently told him, "Yesterday, Mister Zhou bought a pot of white shrimp. I'll meet you at the Ministry of War at High Noon, and we can go to The Flavor of Nostalgia for lunch."

Hearing this, Jing Shao perked up at once. "Then it's decided. I'll check in at the Ministry of War at Sunrise, and I'll be out by Midmorning."

Mu Hanzhang watched his prince rush out in a hurry and let out a light chuckle, shaking his head. How was he always getting more childish? He'd even needed to bribe him with food in order to get him to go to work.

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AT TODAY'S MORNING COURT, just as Mu Hanzhang had anticipated, all the civil officials talked in circles trying to insinuate Jing Shao's guilt without outright accusing him. Jing Chen was absent since he was recuperating from his injuries, and the fourth prince kept his head down and said not a word.

Jing Shao did as his consort had instructed and didn't argue with them. Instead, he emphasized his deep bond with his brother and scolded these civil officials for having such malice in their hearts that they'd even consider this a possibility.

Emperor Hongzheng looked on as Jing Shao's face turned red and his neck strained with fury and said nothing. Only once Jing Shao was done yelling did he slowly begin to speak. "During this attempt on the second prince's life, if it hadn't been for Prince Cheng's bodyguards defending him with their lives, the odds would have been against him. All of you found nothing in this whole investigation and are instead making baseless speculations. Do you think us as naive as a three-year-old child?" This said, he tossed a memorial at the feet of the censor standing at the foot of the marble steps.

The upright Censor Fan Jie had been the one speaking most passionately earlier, but he was struck silent by the emperor's commanding voice. He quietly knelt to pick up the memorial off the floor.

It was a document that had been submitted by the second prince yesterday. In it, he pleaded earnestly for his father not to pursue this matter for the time being, because the people who would most likely fall under suspicion were his own two brothers, and as an elder brother, he could not bear to watch such a situation unfold.

"The second prince is benevolent and deeply compassionate. His contributions to the investigation of the tribute robbery incident in Xinan are nothing short of indispensable. He is to be conferred the title of Prince Rui, for his wisdom. Once Jing Chen has recovered from his injuries, we'll have the Ministry of Rites choose an auspicious date for the ceremony."

Emperor Hongzheng left with a swish of his sleeves, but not before casting a dark, inscrutable glance at his two sons.

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AFTER BREAKFAST, Mu Hanzhang left the house with Yun Zhu and started his day with a quick visit to The Ink Lotus. Although he was the one who'd opened this place, it wasn't really a product he could boast about, so as far as the public knew, someone else had started the business, and all Princely Consort Cheng did was invest.

Since opening day, business had been booming. Others in the capital had noticed how profitable it was, but no one dared venture into the field, for The Ink Lotus had the Prince Cheng Estate's name all over it, and Prince Cheng was notorious for being overbearing and unreasonable.

"Mister Lin." Mu Hanzhang had just entered the shop when he saw a familiar face walk through the door: a gentleman wife from the House of Dingnan. Since this

man's clan was the birth family of Jing Chen's imperial consort, the two of them were technically related.

"Lord Mu…" Running into Mu Hanzhang here made Lord Lin feel rather awkward. "The box you gave me last time… Um, it's too embarrassing to ask the servants to come buy this stuff, so I've had no choice but to come here on my own early in the morning."

Lord Lin's husband was the common-born son of Marquis Dingnan, and since His Lordship hadn't yet divided the family property, they naturally didn't let this gentleman manage the household, which meant that if he ever needed to get anything done, it could get rather difficult.

Listening to him, Mu Hanzhang could tell that he was in a tough spot, and he looked around at the shop's wares. Common folks were much more easygoing, and one couldn't tell by appearance if the men who came here were husbands or wives, so they shopped at The Ink Lotus without worry. But there were many more inconveniences for the wives of nobility. That was why the bestsellers were the cheapest iron tins, and the most expensive silver boxes were bought by those rich and idle sons of nobility who wished to win the hearts of beauties. However, the wooden boxes that had the highest profit margin were not selling nearly as well as he'd originally anticipated.

"If it's uncomfortable for you to come, just tell me how much you need, and I can get someone to wrap them discreetly and deliver them to your residence at the beginning of every month. You can just say it's a gift from me." As Mu Hanzhang thought about it, the gears in this head started turning.

The Imperial Household Department regularly delivered such items to the Prince Cheng Estate each month. Why not allow these noble houses, who needed these things but didn't feel comfortable coming here to shop, to pay a monthly fee to receive deliveries in the same way?

"That would certainly solve a major problem for me." Lord Lin was rather happy to hear this and immediately put down a deposit.

As Mu Hanzhang left The Ink Lotus, he noticed that it was still early in the day, so he decided to walk to the Ministry of War on foot. He made it to the front of the Ministry just in time for Midmorning and saw a figure walk out of its doors, right on time.

"Your Highness, I'm not finished yet. How could you just leave?!" Minister Sun said in defeat, as he ran out after him holding a booklet.

"You can just decide on your own; I have something urgent to attend to. We'll talk later!" Jing Shao waved him away impatiently, and looked up to see his consort already outside, clad in pale azure robes that looked wonderful on him. He found himself grinning as he dashed over.

Chapter 36:
The Abolishment of the Feudatories

MINISTER SUN STARED on helplessly as Prince Cheng ran toward Princely Consort Cheng and said excitedly, “Junqing, let’s go eat white shrimp! If we get there too late, it’ll all be sold out!” Was this the so-called urgent matter that he had to attend to? Also, why was the apparently savage, ruthless, stone-faced Prince Cheng beaming with such a smile as if he were a flower in full bloom?

Mu Hanzhang saw the gray-bearded minister of war standing awkwardly before the door and greeted him apologetically. “His Highness left in a hurry this morning and didn’t have time for breakfast. Please do not hold it against him, Lord Minister.”

“There’s no need to put it that way, Your Highness.” Minister Sun shook himself to regain his thoughts and returned Princely Consort Cheng’s bow courteously. At any rate, Prince Cheng showing his face in the morning and leaving right away was the norm.

Mu Hanzhang smiled back at him and took his prince away to get some food.

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IT WAS STILL EARLY in the day, and there were barely any customers at The Flavor of Nostalgia. But the proprietor Zhou Jin, who habitually opened his doors early, had already set up the restaurant, and all the ingredients were prepped and ready for the day.

Jing Shao reserved a private room on the second floor that faced the street.

“Crabs aren’t quite plump enough with roe at this time of year. Wait until the Ninth Month, then come back here for crab.” There weren’t many customers right now, so Zhou Jin, in head-to-toe bright pink, came to take their order himself.

The two were no longer surprised by the proprietor’s attire.

“Bring a pound and a half of salt-poached shrimp, the same amount of salt-baked shrimp, three pounds of Nostalgia shrimp, a bottle of Huadiao wine, and two bowls of rice,” said Jing Shao, staring at the menu. Anything with the word “Nostalgia” tacked on was a signature dish of the restaurant, and because fresh white shrimp was so hard to come by, this particular option was rarely available.

“Saltwater shrimp and liquor don’t go together. Let me serve you a pot of tea,” Zhou Jin insisted.

Jing Shao frowned. It just didn’t feel right to eat delicious food without a proper drink.

Seeing him frown, Mu Hanzhang called Jing Shao’s pageboy Yun Song over and asked him to go to Miss Mei’s to buy a bottle of green plum wine. “A light wine can neutralize the toxins in shrimp. Mister Zhou, why not also stock some light wine?

It'll surely sell well."

"That's certainly a good idea." Zhou Jin was pleased by his suggestion. "Where is this plum wine shop you mentioned?"

Mu Hanzhang let him know the location; if even a restauranteur like Zhou Jin had no idea this plum wine shop existed, then it seemed as though Miss Mei's business really wasn't doing very well. Since Mister Wang had died on the battlefield and could no longer watch over his Miss Green Plum, and Jing Shao planned to take care of her for him, it was far better for them to send business her way than to just show up regularly to buy wine personally.

"Junqing, you're so good at doing business." Jing Shao peeled a poached shrimp and placed it in Mu Hanzhang's bowl.

Picking up the shrimp with his chopsticks, Mu Hanzhang dipped it in the sauce and took a bite. He chuckled softly. "When I was little, I heard it was rare for the descendants of nobles to earn honors in the civil exams, and even if they did manage, it would be difficult to get an official position with the imperial court. So, I quietly learned some business skills from Concubine Qiu, thinking that even if I couldn't become an official, taking over the family business wouldn't be too bad."

Those born in a noble house seldom took the civil service exam. Instead, depending on imperial grace, and even if they wanted to take on an official position, they had to wait to be granted one by the imperial family. Those who came from scholarly backgrounds and took the civil exams often found themselves ostracized by the reformist faction, making it difficult to get promoted.

Though Mu Hanzhang's tone was light, and he made it sound easy, Jing Shao could hear the struggles implied within those short sentences. Dukes, marquises, earls—these were titles earned by military generals. A child coming from a military family who couldn't practice martial arts would already be looked down upon, let alone a common-born son of a concubine. Thinking of this, Jing Shao was reminded of Mu Lingbao again. It was unfortunate the weather was heating up—he'd have to wait a few more months before he could toss him into a river.

"These shrimps are fried to a crisp, so they're best eaten with the shell." Mu Hanzhang picked up a Nostalgia Shrimp and placed it in Jing Shao's bowl. "Once we finish lunch, let's head to second brother's estate and check on him. I have gifts ready, so in a little bit, I'll ask Yun Zhu to go back and fetch them."

Jing Shao had already emphasized the virtues of filial piety at court today, so visiting his sick brother wouldn't make anyone suspicious that he was taking a side. Even if his brother didn't fall for slanderous provocations, as the saying went, "Lies repeated often enough became truths." It was better if the two brothers could meet each other more often.

Jing Shao had also been planning to make a trip to the second prince's estate today to share the good news that Father was going to confer the title of Prince Rui on his brother. But Jing Shao, who'd always showed up empty-handed and came home with presents, only now realized that he was supposed to bring a gift when he visited his brother!

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JING CHEN WAS IN THE STUDY conferring with his aides when Jing Shao arrived, and he told the servants to let him right in.

There were three others in the room, none of whom Jing Shao recognized. Beside him, Mu Hanzhang quietly observed the expressions on their faces before lowering his eyes. The three of them seemed rather nervous at their sudden entrance, and one of them looked clearly hostile, though only slightly.

"Let's call it a day." Jing Chen's brows drew together, and he waved to signal the other three to leave.

Jing Chen glanced at Mu Hanzhang, and when Jing Shao gave him an encouraging look, he looked away and said in a low voice, "You did very well at court today."

Mu Hanzhang felt mild surprise; he had planned on leaving the brothers alone to talk, but these two had unexpectedly started discussing court affairs right in front of him. They really did think of him as someone they could trust—even someone they could plot with in their bid for the throne. He turned to Jing Shao, who looked back reassuringly.

"As things stand, King Xinan has already angered Father, so it's only a matter of time before we abolish the feudatories. But you must not be the one to bring this up. I will ask others at court to introduce the topic. Then, in two days, I will return to court and present a proposal to Father." Jing Chen handed an accordion-folded booklet to Jing Shao.

"Would this even work?" It took Jing Shao an age to read through it, and it was essentially a method to abolish the feudatories without using military force. The proposal was densely written and complicated. In his previous life, he had been in Yunnan-Tibet at the time, so he had no idea if anyone had suggested abolishing the feudatories diplomatically before. But from what he knew of King Xinan, he had assumed that war was unavoidable.

"You take a look too, Brother-in-Law." Jing Chen gestured for Jing Shao to hand the booklet to Mu Hanzhang.

"You can just call me Hanzhang, Elder Brother." Mu Hanzhang took the proposal from Jing Shao and read through it quickly. After a moment of contemplation, he said, "If a vassal king's army is not strong, this method is feasible."

Jing Chen gave a small nod and turned to Jing Shao. "If war breaks out, do you want to go?"

"I'll go!" Jing Shao said with absolute certainty. "This is a great chance to seize control of the military. If the fighting drags on for a few years, we'll be able to take over at least half of it." Once the War of the Three Feudatories began, it was uncertain how long it would last. Even though Jing Shao knew the weaknesses of each of the vassal kings, he didn't intend to finish the war immediately.

There was a reason the saying went: "When the birds are gone, the bow is set aside; when the rabbit is dead, the hound is cooked."[8] He wasn't about to make the same mistake he'd made in his past life.

As the brothers talked, Mu Hanzhang looked down and remained silent. If war broke out, Jing Shao would spend years far away from home, wouldn't he?

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THE NEXT DAY, there was finally some news of the first prince. He had been rescued by the Shu army, thankfully alive, and was convalescing in Yunnan-Tibet for the time being. Meanwhile, King Xinan had somehow managed to take longer to mobilize his army than Shu. This failure completely enraged Emperor Hongzheng, prompting many ministers to seize this opportunity to propose the abolishment of the feudatories. Several days of debate ensued, and when Jing Chen returned to court, he simply submitted his proposal on the same topic.

Jing Chen was suggesting the generational degradation of the hereditary peerage—meaning that this generation's vassal kings would remain commandery kings, while they would be dukes the next generation, and the next, marquises… Emperor Hongzheng found this approach feasible but didn't react, waiting for the ministers to bring it up multiple times before agreeing to abolish the feudatories.

Thus, the conflict in Yunnan-Tibet was temporarily put on hold while the issue of abolishing the feudatories became the focus.

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IN THE SIXTH MONTH, Concubine Qiu was officially elevated to secondary wife, and Marquis Beiwei invited Jing Shao and Mu Hanzhang to the ceremony.

"Several days ago, Concubine Qiu sent me a message asking me to see her after the ceremony today." Mu Hanzhang sat in the carriage, recalling the letter that his mother had sent to The Ink Lotus.

"She must have some private words she'd like to share," Jing Shao said with a light chuckle. "You can go ahead; I'll wait for you in the front hall."

The ceremony wasn't complicated. It mainly involved changing a concubine's indenture agreement into a marriage contract, then paying respects to the elders, as well as a formal declaration to the ancestral hall.

Now that she was the secondary wife, Lady Qiu was moved into a real courtyard house, which was much more spacious than her old one. She even had a small kitchen of her own.

Mu Hanzhang gazed at his mother in her pink finery. Though she was no longer a young woman, time had done nothing to erode her charms, and she unmistakably embodied the wisdom and grace of a Jiangnan woman.

"Mom…" For the first time, Mu Hanzhang was able to call her this in front of others. Lady Qiu's eyes welled up with tears.

"Oh, my son, my son…" Lady Qiu took his hand, her tears streaming off her face like a broken string of pearls. For twenty years, she hadn't dared to call him her son; he was the young master, while she was nothing but a lowly concubine. Whenever they saw each other, she was the one who had to bow to him.

The handmaidens in the room withdrew one by one, not wishing to intrude.

Mu Hanzhang took the handkerchief from his mother's hand to carefully wipe her tears. "Mom, did you need me for something?"

Taking the handkerchief back, Lady Qiu quickly dabbed away the tears on her face. She let out a light sigh. "I'm stuck in this harem, so I can't help overthinking things sometimes. There's something I've been pondering for quite a while now, and I've come to the conclusion that I really should consult you about it."

Mu Hanzhang quietly listened to his mother's concerns, then smiled. "Mom, you don't have to worry. He doesn't want that position."

"How could anyone not want that position?" Lady Qiu frowned. It seemed like Mu Hanzhang truly trusted Jing Shao. "Even if he doesn't have such intentions, he's an imperial prince without even a son to inherit his title. How could he ever be willing to accept this? And besides, he's still so young. There'll be plenty of opportunities for him to go to war in the future…"

Mu Hanzhang wasn't bothered by the rest, but that last sentence stood out, loud and clear. He thought back to what he'd overheard in the Second Prince's estate the other day. If Jing Shao wanted to use this campaign to control the military, and if the three vassal kings stubbornly fought back, it would take at least three to five years before he could return to the capital.

Was he supposed to wait alone in the estate for that long?

Chapter 37:
Summoned

IN THE 13TH YEAR of Hongzheng, Sixth Month, the imperial court sent the censor Fan Jie to the Xinan Fiefdom to announce an edict order reducing the power of the feudatories. King Xinan refused to comply and sent a written appeal to argue his case.

In the Seventh Month, King Xinan beheaded the imperial envoy and declared himself the ruler of the now-separate Xinan Kingdom—sending shock waves through the imperial court and across the country! Emperor Hongzheng thus decided to dispatch troops to subdue Xinan.

"According to my husband, Xinan terrain is treacherous, easily defensible yet nearly impregnable," said Duchess Mao quietly to the empress. "Moreover, the current King Xinan is a cunning man and quite adept at unconventional strategies. He's extremely difficult to deal with."

Empress Consort Lady Wu, gazed at the blooming pomegranate flowers before her, her brow furrowing slightly. "His Majesty intends to mobilize a hundred thousand troops this time. Sending Prince Cheng might be unwise."

"With a land as harsh and unforgiving as Xinan, winning a war there won't be easy." Duchess Mao carefully recalled what her husband had instructed her to say. "Once the abolishment of the feudatories has begun, all three will probably have to be dismantled. Your Majesty should send the fourth prince when it's time to fight King Huainan. Jiangnan is mostly flat, so as long as there are enough troops and they're well provisioned, it can be conquered."

The empress gave a slight nod.

Duchess Mao breathed a sigh of relief. If the Xinan region was as difficult as she'd described, who could tell how long this war would last? Her daughter was already betrothed to the fourth prince, and if her husband left for war the moment they got married, wouldn't she just end up a grass widow? By the time the fourth prince returned, age would have colored her as time yellowed pearls. Then, if his interest faded and he added a few more high-born concubines to his harem, life would end up very hard for her daughter, even if she became the empress someday.

"There is one more thing, but this one isn't sure whether it is appropriate to speak of it." Duchess Mao wrung her hands, wavering.

"We're all family here, so there's no need to hold back." The empress raised a hand and plucked a bright red pomegranate flower from the bush, a sneer tugging at the corner of her lips. She used to serve the late empress just as cautiously, beginning every sentence with "This one has one more thing to say but is unsure if it's appropriate," but just because she wore a pomegranate flower one time, she'd been accused of violating protocol, and the late empress had ordered her to kneel in front of the Rite of Luan Palace for two hours during the hottest period in the summer!

"This one heard that Prince Cheng gifted the fourth prince a princely concubine last month," Duchess Mao said, cautiously glancing at the expression on the empress's face. Noticing that she wasn't angry, she continued, "This one really

shouldn't meddle in such things, but even though the fourth prince is going to marry his imperial consort next month, rumors are flying in the capital that he is now quite fond of that woman."

She had no idea how word of this had gotten out, but at any rate, Marquise Beiwei had certainly heard, and she had told everyone that before the fourth prince had even married his imperial consort, he was already giving all his favor to a concubine, making subtle and not so subtle jabs at how her daughter wouldn't have had a good life even if she had managed to marry into the fourth prince's estate. And now, that woman who'd been publicly shamed over her daughter being snubbed was once again mingling with the other noble ladies, wearing a thoroughly relieved expression on her face, and it had made Duchess Mao so mad that she hadn't been able to eat anything at all at her last two meals.

"Is that so?" The empress crushed the pomegranate flower in her hand, then took the silk handkerchief a palace maid offered her and wiped her hands. "We'll call Jing Yu over later and ask him about it. Don't you worry, we will not allow the rightful imperial consort to be mistreated."

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THE WEATHER was already swelteringly hot, and Jing Shao was drenched in sweat after only practicing his swordplay for a little while. He stripped himself of his sweat-soaked clothes and ran shirtless to the shade tree, then took a wet cloth from Zhixi and wiped his face before he sat down next to his consort.

"The sun is at its height right now. Don't practice anymore." Mu Hanzhang, who was reclining on a rattan daybed to cool off, handed him a slice of watermelon.

Jing Shao wolfed it down and finally felt a bit cooler. "This watermelon is so cold and refreshing. It really is a delight."

"His Highness asked me first thing this morning to keep it cool in the well," Miaoxi said, smiling, setting out a new plate of freshly sliced watermelon on the small table.

Yun Zhu switched to a larger fan and vigorously fanned behind the two of them.

"When I was practicing earlier, I suddenly realized that Father must have sent Fan Jie on purpose." Jing Shao ate another slice of watermelon.

"Why do you say that?" Leaning back on the daybed, Mu Han-zhang turned another page.

"When Fan Jie talked, he always lost all sense of tact, and Father's long been fed up with his pedantry. He was constantly threatening to stain the columns with blood by running into them with his head for some deathly remonstration or other, but Father still couldn't get rid of him." Thinking about how that petty, cunning villain King Xinan must have been irritated by Fan Jie to the point of trembling with rage, Jing Shao could barely stop himself from laughing.

Mu Hanzhang shot a look at the prince, who didn't seem at all regretful about the martyrdom of a loyal minister of the court, and shook his head with a sigh. "This sacrifice he made for the country will at least fulfill Minister Fan's wish to be

remembered throughout the ages."

Jing Shao ate three slices of watermelon, wiped his hands, then leaned back against his consort to look up at the dappled sunlight filtering through the treetops. A cool breeze was blowing, making him feel drowsy.

"Why did Father keep you behind today?" Jing Shao's big head just happened to rest on his lower abdomen, and he was breathing a steady stream of warmth into his lap. Mu Hanzhang shifted uncomfortably. He readjusted Jing Shao to rest on his thigh instead before dismissing the handmaidens and Yun Zhu.

"Hmph. He said he's going to find me another secondary wife! It has to be the empress consort again—she wants me to marry her niece!" Jing Shao sniffed contemptuously. The empress consort was clearly upset that he'd given Yanji to Jing Yu, so now she intended to marry Earl Yongchang's common-born daughter to him in order to get under his skin.

Mu Hanzhang's hand froze on the way to his book. "Then, how did you respond?"

"I said…" Jing Shao had only now realized that he'd been shifted, and he turned over unhappily to direct his face at Junqing's nether regions again, deliberately nudging that place with his nose. "I only like men. I can't even muster any interest in women now."

The friction of the fabric rubbing against him somehow made the sensation even more intense; Mu Hanzhang let out a soft groan and retreated as much as he could. "How could you say such a thing? Father is probably angry."

"It's still better than letting them throw random women at me." Jing Shao mischievously chased after him, pressing the side of his face against the little Junqing in his pants.

Mu Hanzhang furrowed his brow, then used both of his hands to transfer that big head onto the nearby jade pillow, claiming he did so because—it was too hot!

Jing Shao pouted with discontent, then leapt to his feet and grabbed a long spear nearby to start practicing again.

As he watched Jing Shao practicing so diligently, the smile gradually faded from Mu Hanzhang's face. Father had already summoned Jing Shao alone for an audience several days ago, and the job of leading an expedition to Xinan was essentially destined for him. However, though it was imminent, Jing Shao was showing no sign of any sorrow over their upcoming separation. Perhaps to Jing Shao, leaving home to go to war had already become routine, but seeing him so single-mindedly focused on future battles, Mu Hanzhang only felt terrible inside.

Duofu appeared in the ornamental gardens in a great flurry. "Your Highnesses, someone is here from the palace."

"Who is it?" Jing Shao put away the spear he was holding.

"It is Duolu, from the empress's palace." Duofu scrunched up his face resentfully. He and Duolu had entered the palace in the same group of eunuchs; by the time he'd ascended to become the steward for the late empress, Duolu had still only been a young eunuch in the Pure Consort's palace. Now that the Pure Consort had become the Empress Consort, that brat put on airs whenever he saw him.

"Well then, do let him in." Mu Hanzhang handed an outer robe to Jing Shao, and a slender eunuch briskly entered the ornamental gardens and bowed to the both

of them, his expression holding an unmistakable arrogance.

Jing Shao furrowed his brow. “Eunuch Duolu, are you here because Mother has something she wishes to discuss?”

“By the empress’s command, Princely Consort Cheng is to proceed to the Rite of Luan Palace without delay.” Duolu’s slightly shrill voice grated on their ears.

“At this time of day?” Jing Shao frowned. It was just past High Noon. Did the empress not need to take her afternoon nap? To summon Junqing so urgently, it couldn’t possibly be about anything positive.

Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together. Since he was a man, the empress had never summoned him to the palace since the day after the wedding. Jing Shao had just refused to take Earl Yongchang’s common-born daughter as a secondary wife earlier today, so the empress was likely hastily summoning Mu Hanzhang to the palace to try to get him on her side. Or perhaps she was simply upset and wanted to take her anger out on him.

“This one will go change first; please wait a moment,” he said, making a move to change into his court attire.

“Hold on!” Jing Shao grabbed Mu Hanzhang and sent a cold look toward Duolu, who had come empty-handed. “Did Mother say what this is all about?”

“I would never dare to inquire.” Duofu knew that Prince Cheng was difficult to handle, so he softened his tone and said, “Her Majesty only summoned Princely Consort Cheng, so she undoubtedly merely wishes to have a casual family chat. There’s no need to worry, Your Highness.”

Jing Shao didn’t believe for a second that the empress consort would summon Junqing at this time of day just to have a casual chat. But since the empress had officially summoned him and hadn’t explicitly stated the reason, they couldn’t just reject it outright. Turning away from Duolu, he followed his consort into the house, retrieved his imperial prince court attire, and started to change into it. “I’ll accompany you.”

Mu Hanzhang put out a hand to stop him. “How do you intend to enter the palace at this hour?” He was going to the Rite of Luan Palace; without an official summons, Jing Shao was only allowed to visit Mother for dawn and dusk reflections. Trying to enter the palace at this hour would likely get him in trouble. “Don’t worry; whatever happens, I’ll be able to handle it.” Duolu had deliberately emphasized that only Princely Consort Cheng was being summoned, implying that Jing Shao was explicitly not invited.

Jing Shao watched coldly as his consort followed Duolu into the palace’s carriage. He grabbed Miaoxi and said, “Go with him. If anything happens, come immediately and find me in the southern study!” Miaoxi used to be a palace maid, so she was familiar with the palace’s layout. She was also quick on her feet.

Miaoxi nodded seriously and quickly followed.

The southern study was where the younger princes went to school. At this time of day, it was the only place inside the palace where Jing Shao was permitted to wander freely. Emperor Hongzheng had always placed great value on filial piety, encouraging the adult princes to tutor their younger brothers whenever they were available. However, the emperor could be unpredictable, so if they visited too often, they might be suspected of bringing their younger brothers into their individual factions. So, after leaving the palace to establish their own estates, the princes seldom

made any trips to the southern study.

Jing Shao waited for the carriage to gain some distance between them before mounting Shadow to follow from afar. He waited to see the carriage actually pass through the palace gates before he turned the horse around to enter through a side gate.

“Your Highness, what are you doing here at this hour?” The Guard Captain, Xiao Qian, who was making his rounds, came to say hi to Jing Shao when he saw him. Xiao Qian was a distant relative of Marquis Dingnan, and he had some rapport with Jing Shao.

“Xiao Qian!” Jing Shao slung an arm over Captain Xiao’s shoulders and pulled him aside. Then, he stuffed a golden pixiu into his hand; the winged draconic tiger token was about the size of an egg. “If a maid runs out of the Rite of Luan Palace and heads toward the southern study, please let her pass. I’ll take full responsibility for anything that happens.”

Xiao Qian was still hesitant, but the final sentence put his mind at ease and he tucked the pixiu away. “Rest assured, Your Highness, it’s a trivial matter.” It was quite normal for a palace maid to move about the place, so unless a noble in the palace instructed otherwise, it didn’t make sense to get in her way.

Chapter 38:
Punitive Kneeling

BLUESTONE SLABS PAVED the forecourt before the Rite of Luan Palace's main hall, an empty area without any vegetation. It led toward a set of grand, majestic marble steps, but during this quiet stretch in the afternoon, walking that path gave one a deep sense of suffocating oppression.

Mu Hanzhang followed his eunuch guide until he'd reached the front of the main hall. Perhaps due to the heat, the empress was not inside, and she'd had an imperial daybed prepared beneath the peristyle instead. Two palace maids slowly fanned behind the daybed with two long-handled peacock-feather fans, while the empress, dressed in brightly colored robes embroidered with golden phoenixes, sat upright on the daybed and watched Mu Hanzhang ascend the marble stairs step by step.

Mu Hanzhang gracefully walked to the peristyle and knelt to kowtow. "This humble one offers his greetings to Mother. Long live Your Majesty!"

The empress picked up her cup, took a small sip, then elegantly dabbed at the corner of her mouth with a handkerchief before speaking at a measured pace. "Rise. Hurry and bring him a seat straightaway; this is Prince Cheng's dearest treasure, you know. If he should hurt himself kneeling, we can't possibly afford to compensate Prince Cheng."

Mu Hanzhang turned his gaze downward, pretending he was completely unaware of her sarcasm, and thanked her graciously in accordance with the rites before sitting down on the square stool that a palace maid had brought over.

Princely Consort Cheng displayed neither the trepidation nor unease that she expected. He sat when he was told to sit, his impeccable behavior and flawless etiquette leaving no room for criticism. The empress, who had drawn a deep breath ready to scold him with, was forced instead to swallow it.

By the time Jing Shao made it to the southern study, the young princes had already woken up from their naps, but afternoon lessons had yet to begin. They were all quietly reviewing their lessons from earlier in the day as they waited for the teacher to arrive. As the weather was getting warmer, Emperor Hongzheng had excused the princes from their afternoon martial arts classes, entirely replacing them with literary lessons.

Standing outside the study, Jing Shao watched these children—all of them under ten—looking down at their books with solemn expressions, and recalled his own childhood. His mother had still been alive then, and she would send fresh fruit to the study every day at around this time. It hadn't just been for him and Jing Chen either; both Jing Rong and Jing Yu had gotten some as well. Jing Yu always thought other people's things were better than his, and being the youngest, would pester Jing Chen to swap snacks. Jing Chen always indulged him without getting mad, but when Jing Yu went too far, Jing Shao would get annoyed on Jing Chen's behalf, inevitably ending up settling matters with his fists.

After the empress consort rose to power, there was no more fruit in the afternoon. For years afterward, no new princes were born in the palace, and once the

first prince left to establish his estate, only three of them were left in the study. Every day, someone would bring fruit and snacks for Jing Yu, but the dishes were only ever single servings…

"Your Highness!" A childish voice pulled Jing Shao out of his reverie. Looking down, he saw a chubby boy who only reached his thigh pulling on his hem. This was the Seventh Prince, Jing Yi.

Jing Shao patted his head and called his name. Immediately, the boy smiled so widely that his eyes disappeared. "Your Highness, you still recognize me?!"

"It's not like it's been years, so how could I not?" Jing Shao asked, somewhere between bemused and frustrated, and reached down to pick him up. "Have you gained weight again, boy?" Jing Shao only managed to remember him because Jing Yu had always been a bit chubby. He seldom saw any of his younger brothers, so if any of the others had pulled on his hem, he'd have to determine their identity based on age.

"Your Highness…" The others in the room all looked up when they heard the commotion and stood up from their books.

"I was just passing by; you can go back to studying." Jing Shao waved a hand, signaling for them to sit back down.

"Your Highness, they say you defeated a hundred thousand Xiongnu. When I saw you at Spring Festival, I really wanted to hear about all your battles. But you were sitting all the way up front, and I couldn't get over there." Jing Yi, emboldened by the fact that his brother had picked him up, didn't return to his seat even after he was set back down. He refused to let go of Jing Shao's robe and insisted on tales of his battlefield exploits. Even though the other princes didn't say anything, their eyes filled with eager anticipation.

"Your Highness, do all the Xiongnu have big beards?"

"Your Highness, are there wolf packs in the vast deserts?"

"Your Highness…"

When Emperor Hongzheng entered the room, it was to the sight of Jing Shao surrounded by several of his younger brothers, and he was for once at a loss. The sight softened his expression without his knowing it.

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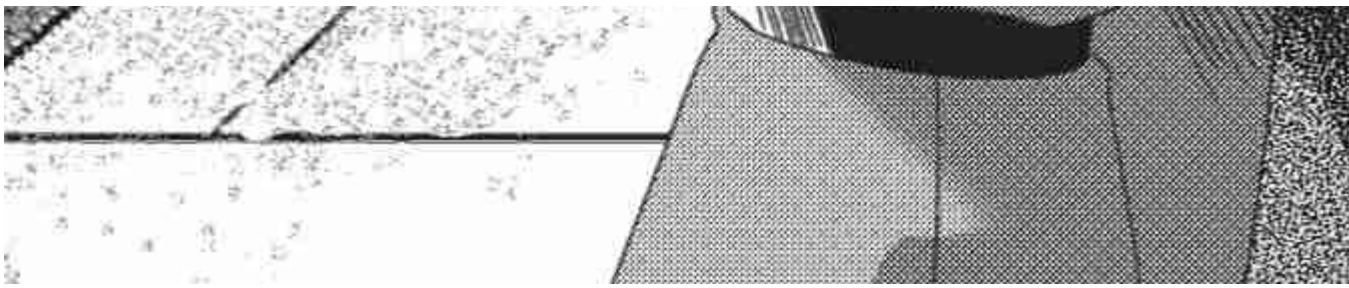
"TO ANSWER MOTHER, refusing the concubine was His Highness's decision. This one was unaware." Mu Hanzhang respectfully lowered his head, responding to each of the empress's increasingly harsh, pointed questions with a gentle voice. He didn't say a word more than necessary.

"You're older than the prince, so it's your role to advise him! He's about to head out to war, and he hasn't even had a single child yet. If anything should happen to him, what will become of his peerage? An imperial prince with no one to inherit his title?! You're a Provincial Graduate—how could you be so foolish?" The empress consort pushed at the tea leaves in her cup gently with the lid. What was it that he'd said—ah, "I only like men." Were all those concubines in the Prince Cheng Estate

merely decorative? In the imperial study today, as soon as His Majesty had mentioned that Jing Shao should take her niece as secondary wife, he'd said he had no interest in women. He was clearly just insulting her!

Mu Hanzhang, who had been patiently dealing with her all this time, clenched his hand into a fist. How could she say, "If anything should happen"? What did she mean by "no one to inherit his title"? These were things you simply did not say before someone headed out to war! "The title of imperial prince is not hereditary. Even if he had a son from a secondary wife, the highest title this child could inherit would be Defender-General of the State—"



The empress consort slammed her teacup onto the side table. “What are you saying?! Are you airing your grievances against us? Against His Majesty?” At these words, all the palace maids around them fell to their knees.

“This one would never dare.” Mu Hanzhang hurriedly rose from his seat and knelt on the floor.

“You mean there *are* things you don’t dare do? As a princely consort of the imperial family, you have forced out the concubines, indulged your jealousy, and monopolized your husband’s favor. And now, you won’t even permit an imperial prince to leave behind any descendants. What audacity, what insolence!” The empress’s words were aggressive, each one striking at his heart. But Mu Hanzhang remained silent through it all—the empress was clearly using anger to cover her embarrassment, and if he said anything else, she’d simply find fault with it.

The empress consort took a proffered handkerchief from a palace maid and wiped off the tea that had splashed onto her hand. Casting a look toward Mu Hanzhang, who still knelt on the floor, she let out a light sigh. “We certainly don’t wish to make things awkward for you, but since you have married into the imperial family, you must consider the imperial family’s interests. Why don’t we do this—go kneel on the marble platform over there, and you can get up whenever you’ve figured things out.”

Mu Hanzhang smiled bitterly despite himself. Figure things out? She hadn’t stipulated what it was he was supposed to reflect on, so what conclusion was he meant to come to?

The marble platform referred to the landing above the marble steps in front of the hall; having been exposed to the scorching sun for hours, it had become as hot as burning charcoal. Mu Hanzhang elegantly lifted his hem and knelt on a marble slab right in the center. It was midsummer, and the sun was most intense in the afternoon, searing any exposed skin. Before long, it would start to hurt.

The empress bid all the palace attendants to rise, took a freshly brewed cup of tea from a maid, and began to slowly sip at it, leaving Princely Consort Cheng kneeling alone. She’d like to see just how strong this “love more enduring than gold” between Prince Cheng and his princely consort truly was.

Miaoxi stood anxiously behind a row of palace maids, unable to find her opportunity to leave.

Sweat trickled down Mu Hanzhang’s handsome face, sliding along the graceful contour of his chin, and dripped onto the hem of his purple court robes. He kept his eyes lowered, and he discreetly tucked his hands inside his sleeves. The sun was behind him and could only shine on his back, so at least he wouldn’t get sunburned. Unfortunately, there was more than one layer to his courtly attire, and they were soon soaked through with sweat. The heat from the scalding stone slab beneath him gradually seeped into his body.

Mu Hanzhang contemplated the purpose behind the empress’s actions today in an attempt to divert his attention and alleviate his body’s perception of his discomfort. Jing Shao had rejected the matter of taking a secondary wife outright, and His Majesty had not forced the issue—so the empress had felt humiliated. She wanted to punish him in order to let everyone know that when it came to the inner quarters of the imperial family, she had the final say. It was also meant to serve as a warning to Jing Shao that he shouldn’t speak recklessly.

When the empress finished her second cup of tea, she finally had to leave to go to the washroom.

Sweat hung on his long eyelashes, and his vision became tinged with a rainbow halo. With a sense of bitter amusement, Mu Hanzhang thought that perhaps the empress simply wanted to vent, and that even she didn't know how to end this. It was too bad that he was a man and not a frail concubine, and he'd probably be fine even if he stayed under the sun until it set. Should he pretend to faint to give her a graceful way out?

When another palace maid left for the tea room to change out the tea leaves, Miaoxi left with her and quickly darted to the side as soon as she turned the corner in the winding corridor, then ran out when no one was paying any attention to her. She had walked these halls since she was a child, so they were ingrained in her memory, but somehow the path heading toward the southern study seemed particularly long today.

She was so frantic that her brow was covered in sweat, yet she didn't dare run too fast lest the palace guards should suspect her. Mu Hanzhang was such a humble gentleman, genteel and refined as jade, that the prince never said a single harsh word to him, yet he was being forced to kneel on stone slabs in this sweltering summer heat.

When His Highness found out, he would surely be devastated!

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"YOUR SON wholeheartedly wishes to stabilize the realm for Father, but when it comes to children and imperial grandchildren, there are two older brothers above me. Besides, fourth brother will be getting married next month." As his father was in a rather good mood today, and Junqing was still stuck at the Rite of Luan Palace, Jing Shao tried to look as honest and sincere as he could. "Your son and his consort haven't even been married for four months, and your son is so fond of him at this moment that there is no desire at all to take anyone new."

To think that his third son, whose heart had always only known how to lead an army into battle, would find his first love! Emperor Hongzheng couldn't help but burst into a full-bellied laugh.

"Your Highness! Your Highness!" Miaoxi came running up desperately, almost falling over her own feet, and the guards stopped her at the study's doors.

Jing Shao and Emperor Hongzheng both turned to look at the sound of her voice.

"Miaoxi!" Jing Shao saw her face and knew right away that something had happened to Junqing—his expression immediately darkened.

"What's going on?" Emperor Hongzheng frowned and gestured for the guards to let her through.

"Greetings, Your Majesty!" At the sight of Emperor Hongzheng, Miaoxi immediately fell to her knees with a thud and started crying. "Please, Your Majesty, please save the princely consort! He's been given punitive kneeling in front of the

Rite of Luan Palace, and he's already knelt under the scorching sun for two hours!"

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"YOUR MAJESTY, that maid from the Prince Cheng Estate has left." Duolu glanced around and whispered next to the empress consort's ear, "I just heard that Prince Cheng is also here in the palace. He's in the southern study."

The empress consort huffed derisively. "Let her go. We are most interested in what this Prince Cheng is capable of!"

Mu Hanzhang wasn't far away, so he heard every word she said. Despite himself, he grew restless with worry—if Jing Shao barged into the Rite of Luan Palace, ignoring any consequences, that would be a severe crime!

Suddenly, all the guards and palace maids on the marble steps fell to their knees and cried out, "Greetings, Your Majesty! Long live Your Majesty!"

The empress consort's hand shook at these words; her green jade teacup and lid fell to the floor with a sharp clatter.

"Junqing!" Jing Shao apologized to his father, then rushed up the marble steps in several big strides.

A hint of a smirk played at Mu Hanzhang's lips, hidden in the lowered angle of his head. With His Majesty here, he might as well go all in and escalate the situation. And so, he weakly lifted his head, glanced at the approaching Jing Shao, and cried out softly in a hoarse voice, "Your Highness…" Then he closed his eyes and limply fell backward!

Chapter 39:
Forgot to Mention

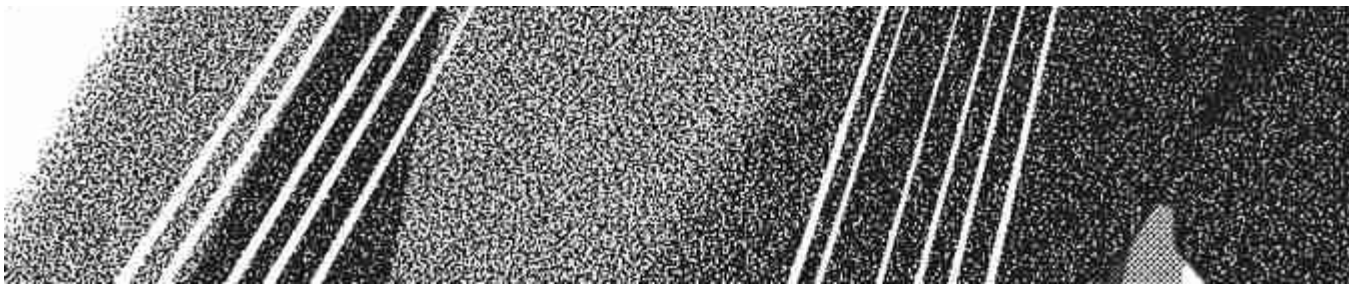
JING SHAO LOOKED ON helplessly as Mu Hanzhang collapsed, feeling his heart clench as if it had been yanked sharply upward. Utilizing his lightness arts, he leapt swiftly forward and wrapped Mu Hanzhang into his arms. “Junqing, Junqing…” Mu Hanzhang’s clothes were soaked through, and his handsome face, covered in sweat, was white as paper.

“Move him onto the daybed at once!” Emperor Hongzheng didn’t give the half-kneeling empress leave to rise and instead pointed at the cool imperial daybed. He turned to Anxian. “Send for an imperial physician!”

Jing Shao placed Mu Hanzhang carefully onto the imperial daybed, accepted the cool tea handed to him by a palace attendant, and slowly dribbled it through those parched lips. Taking a nearby fan, Miaoxi fanned them while wiping her tears.

As Jing Shao held his consort’s hand, fury turned his eyes red. “Father…” He looked to Emperor Hongzheng, who stood behind him, but before he’d finished speaking, the fingers he held inside his palm pinched him, stopping him in his tracks and making him turn back to the man on the daybed.

To Emperor Hongzheng, it looked as though Jing Shao was frantically upset and wanted to speak out, yet couldn’t criticize the empress due to his status, so he could only swallow whatever words he was about to say—perfectly embodying a distressed lover! With a furrowed brow, Emperor Hongzheng sat down on a chair the attendants brought and turned his attention to the empress, who was kneeling rather awkwardly to the side. “What is going on here?”



“To answer Your Majesty, this one invited Princely Consort Cheng here for a chat today. But alas, this child spoke rudely and has not shown a shred of remorse, and so this one told him to kneel over there and to reflect on his words for a while… This one truly never expected that a man such as Princely Consort Cheng would be so frail…” The empress never could have predicted that Prince Cheng would bring over the emperor. As the mother of the nation, she had the right to punish Mu Hanzhang for even a single wrong word. But now that he had fainted from kneeling, and just so happened to do so right in front of His Majesty, she had instead given the emperor the impression that she was intentionally finding fault with him and mistreating a son-in-law.

Emperor Hongzheng gave the empress a long stare. He was well aware of what had happened here today. Usually, when she disciplined one favored concubine or another, he would turn a blind eye to maintain peace in the harem. But with Prince Cheng about to head off to war, here she was, mistreating Princely Consort Cheng. She clearly intended to cause trouble for him!

Seeing the man in the daybed slowly open his eyes, Jing Shao, concerned, immediately leaned in close to whisper, “Junqing, where does it hurt?”

Making silent eye contact, Mu Hanzhang pinched his palm again and gently shook his head, letting him know that he shouldn’t speak carelessly.

Jing Shao blinked, and taking the wet towel proffered by the palace maid, gently wiped Mu Hanzhang’s cheeks and forehead, not saying a word. Emperor Hongzheng didn’t respond to the empress either. Silence reigned in front of the Rite of Luan Palace, the only sound the distant buzzing of cicadas.

The imperial physician, a man with a peppery beard, appeared at just the right moment, disrupting this stifling atmosphere. The medical director of the Academy of Medicine took one look at Mu Hanzhang’s face, then silently took his pulse.

He produced several pills from his medicine case and asked him to take them before turning to Emperor Hongzheng. “To report to Your Majesty, judging by the princely consort’s pulse, he likely fainted due to summer heat entering his body, on top of his poor circulation. Now that he is awake, taking these heat-relief pills and getting some rest for a day should suffice. However…”

Hearing this, Jing Shao’s ears perked up, and he asked anxiously, “However what?”

“The princely consort’s meridians seem to be more fragile than the average man’s, and his body is less robust than an ordinary person,” the medical director told him frankly. “This one can give him a prescription that he should take in the evening. Otherwise, the heat won’t be completely dispelled, possibly leaving him with long-term vertigo.”

Emperor Hongzheng recalled Mu Hanzhang’s wan face after kneeling for too long on the day after his wedding and nodded slightly at this. Then, he said to Jing Shao, “You should head home with him. It’s hard for you to bathe and change in the palace.”

Jing Shao wanted to say something else, but the man in his arms prevented him from doing so.

Mu Hanzhang made a great effort to bow. “Thank you, Father, for your concern.”

Emperor Hongzheng waved at that and said to Jing Shao, who was still clearly outraged, “About what you brought up earlier, We have agreed to it. I will give you satisfaction on what happened here today, but later.”

“Certainly!” At this promise, Jing Shao bowed, picked up his consort, then turned and left.

Emperor Hongzheng waited for Jing Shao and his household to leave before he finally looked down at the somewhat nervous empress consort. “As the mother of a nation, you’re not even as good as these two young men at conducting yourself and keeping your composure. With you acting this way, how is Prince Cheng supposed to feel at ease leaving Princely Consort Cheng in the capital by himself?!”

The empress’s head snapped up. “Your Majesty, when a general goes to war, his family stays home in the capital—this has been the rule since ancient times!”

“And what do you know of rules?” Emperor Hongzheng huffed derisively and threw the teacup and its lid at the empress consort’s feet, and they smashed apart. “What did we say to you in the imperial study before noon? It went in one ear and out the other!”

“Your Majesty! This one…” The empress had only just realized that in seeking momentary satisfaction, she had brought trouble upon herself, giving His Majesty a bad impression of her as someone who failed to see the big picture. Princely Consort Cheng was a man and could not give Prince Cheng children. So, the other day, she had advised the emperor to make Prince Cheng take a secondary consort so that he would have descendants to keep him tethered, thus preventing him from turning against the family. Although Emperor Hongzheng had agreed, he had also mentioned that Prince Cheng was hot-blooded and could not be coerced—he couldn’t force the issue.

Emperor Hongzheng rubbed the crease between his brows, then pointed at the empress consort on the floor. “Go to the late empress’s memorial and reflect on your wrongs for three days! Think about what you promised when you were enthroned, and how you’re treating Jing Chen and Jing Shao these days!” Then, he rose and left with a whip of his sleeve.

Emperor Hongzheng turned back to look at the Rite of Luan Palace’s golden-colored bricks and glazed emerald tiles, softly sighing. If the late empress were still alive, no doubt both the harem and the court would be spared from much turmoil…

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AFTER MU HANZHANG took a bath and changed into soft, thin underrobes, he leaned against the head of the bed. Watching Jing Shao busy himself around the room, he couldn’t help but tell him, “I’m fine, just stop worrying.”

“Drink your medicine.” Jing Shao was still concerned about the doctor’s comment on this long-term vertigo, and insisted on supervising him while he drank the entire decoction.

Mu Hanzhang had no choice but to take the bowl from him, tipping his head back to swallow the whole thing. Before he could even taste the bitterness, he was handed a bowl of water. “This medication reacts adversely with honey, so you can’t

have any with fruit. Have some water instead."

Mu Hanzhang looked up at the serious expression on Jing Shao's face and felt a tingling, warm sensation in his chest. He was clearly a hotheaded, reckless man, but when it came to anything that had anything to do with him, he was always so careful.

Watching Junqing, whose face was still a bit pale, Jing Shao felt such a stabbing pain in his heart that he could barely stand it. He turned to fetch the liniment, then slowly rolled up the hem of Mu Hanzhang's pants. There he found bruising on those fair knees from his kneeling, along with the heat rash he'd received from those scorching stone slabs; Jing Shao's forehead involuntarily creased in distress.

Mu Hanzhang looked at his knees. "You can't rub liniment on them. If you do, this rash won't go away." Feeling an uncomfortable itch over the rash, he couldn't help but scratch it carefully with a finger.

Those once beautiful knees were mottled with black and red, and there wasn't a thing Jing Shao could do about it. He slowly bent down and left a soft kiss on a bruise, then he sprawled over his consort's legs and wrapped his arms around his waist, looking distressed.

Mu Hanzhang reached out and patted Jing Shao's head. "I'm not that delicate. By the way, what did you talk to Father about today?" As the saying went, "Discipline your child in public but your wife in private." Father clearly didn't wish to reprimand the empress in front of them, but that parting agreement he left was obviously meant as compensation for Jing Shao.

"Oh, we march next month, so I thought I'd head to the army camp by tomorrow to get acquainted with the commanders." Jing Shao buried his face in that soft underrobe, greedily inhaling the refreshing fragrance on his consort's body. That dry, warm scent always made him crave more.

"You're leaving…tomorrow?" Mu Hanzhang froze. He had thought they had a fortnight still before they had to part; he hadn't expected it to come so soon.

"That's right," Jing Shao said as he sat up, noticing something off about his consort's demeanor, though he wasn't sure what it was about. He began to explain, "I'm used to getting to know my generals before we set out to avoid something going awry along the way. But right now the army's not even twenty miles away, so it's a pleasant surprise that Father agreed to let me go."

Mu Hanzhang heard the excitement in his voice and slowly lowered his gaze. "Once you leave, there's no way to know when you'll come back. Have you…" *Have you not even thought about how we're about to part?* He pursed his lips tightly, and unwilling to see the look on Jing Shao's face, Mu Hanzhang turned away. This man still behaved like a child; he was completely unaware of the pain of separation.

Jing Shao's eyes widened. He'd never even thought to separate from Junqing! Never mind that a turbulent place like the capital wasn't safe, and that in his past life, it had been inside this estate that Junqing's health grew far worse than before. He simply couldn't feel at ease leaving him here. To Jing Shao, the most important consideration was that if he had to go a single day without seeing his consort, he feared he'd have no mind for battle at all! He had truly thought his consort knew this all long. But it seemed he'd somehow forgotten to tell him?

"Junqing…" Jing Shao gazed at his consort, whose eyes remained downcast with sorrow. Twilight's afterglow shone over his handsome profile, his long eyelashes

leaving a fan-shaped shadow beneath his eyes; he looked so adorable that Jing Shao couldn't help but act on the sudden impulse that overcame him and pull Mu Hanzhang into his arms. "Junqing, I'll be going to the army camp tomorrow, so in the future, I'm afraid that… Well. We should enjoy ourselves to the fullest tonight."

Mu Hanzhang pressed his lips together slightly, then after a silent moment, slowly wrapped his arms around Jing Shao. His stamina had never been as good as Jing Shao's, and if they performed too many times in one night it would become too much for him. Not to mention that overdoing this sort of thing wasn't good for either of them, so unless it was a special occasion, he never let Jing Shao satisfy himself more than twice in a day.

But as their parting was imminent, he felt he could indulge him just this once.

Jing Shao felt the man in his arms relax and, uninclined to hold back, swiftly relieved him of his robes. To keep those pained knees safe, he positioned himself between Mu Hanzhang's legs and bent down to plant countless tender kisses on that handsome face touched with melancholy.

Mu Hanzhang groaned in effort; there was a polished rattan mat beneath him rather than a sheet, so all he had to clutch at was the round pillow under his neck. No matter how many times they'd done this, the initial entry was inevitably painful.

Jing Shao kissed away the sweat beading Mu Hanzhang's forehead, put his lips over the curving arc of his neck, and began to move with slow and gentle rocking motions. He waited for the man beneath him to adjust before he gradually quickened his pace.

Mu Hanzhang wrapped his arms tightly around Jing Shao's shoulders, giving him free rein to thrust inside him with scalding, solid heat as he thought—just a little more, just a little more, so that he could carve this sensation into his memories, so that he could think of it with longing over the next few months, or perhaps even the next few years.

Mu Hanzhang trembled, wishing to hide away from Jing Shao's increasingly forceful thrusts, the unceasing and terrifying pleasure on the verge of becoming unbearable. But Jing Shao seemed to have discerned his intentions and targeted that spot relentlessly, grinding against it.

"Ah…I can't take it anymore…" Mu Hanzhang moaned. It felt like they'd been going for hours, and Mu Hanzhang had long since passed his breaking point, his slender legs helplessly trembling.

Junqing furrowed his brow as if in pain, scalded by the heat that had just spilled inside of him, and came at the same time over his stomach. Jing Shao felt it was nowhere near enough. His own cock, which had briefly softened, was ready to go again.

Trembling in the aftermath of his bliss, Mu Hanzhang felt Jing Shao, still deep inside of him, harden again, and he frowned despite himself. Hoarsely, he pleaded, "It's too much…"

"It's the last time, I promise," Jing Shao said, kissing his teary eyes.

Mu Hanzhang turned his eyes to him, and he slowly nodded as he breathed out a soft sigh, knowing that they'd have to part the moment he woke up tomorrow.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
The Wife Comes First
VOLUME 2

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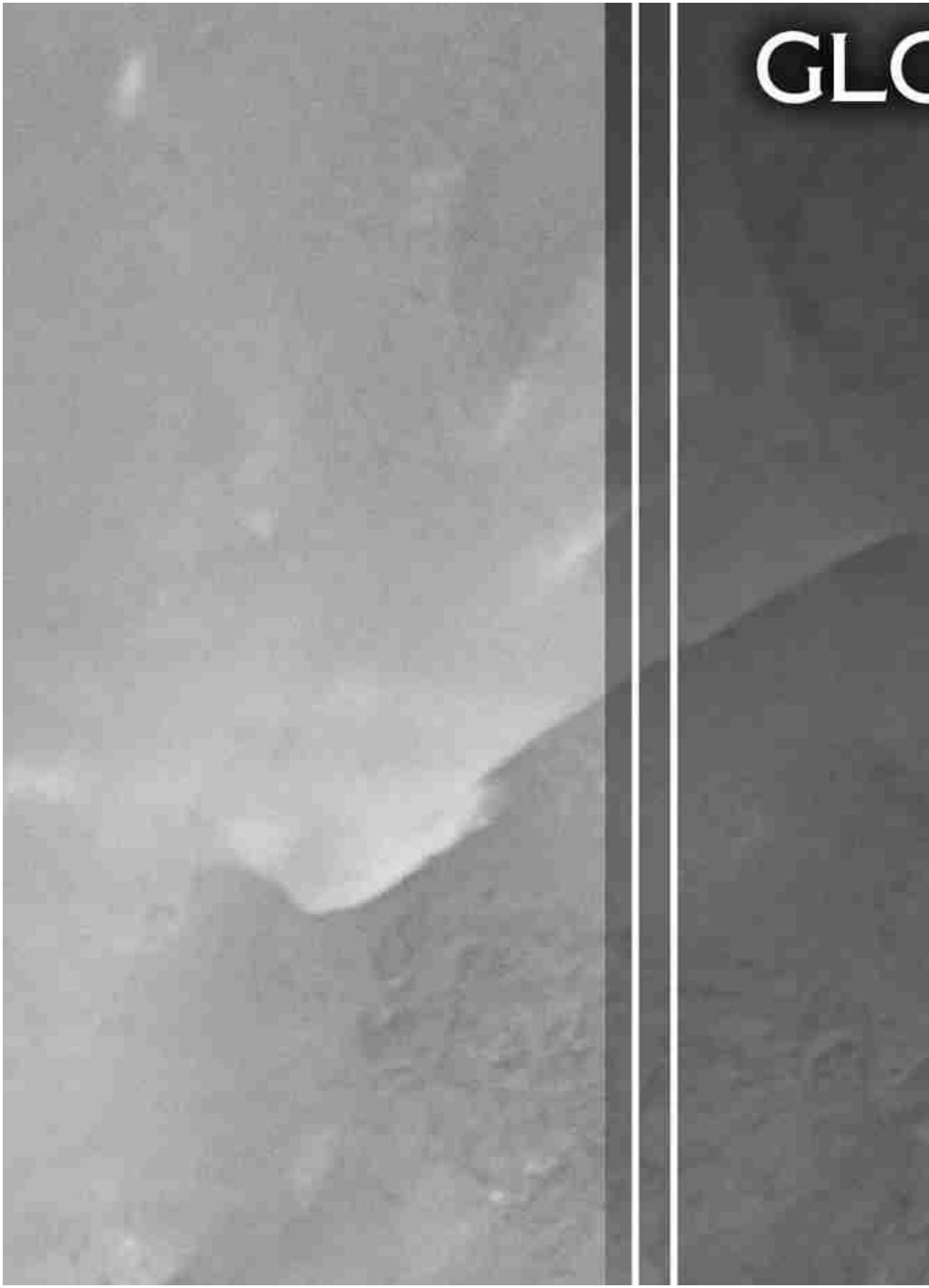
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CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

JING SHAO □□: The third prince, granted the title of Prince Cheng at nineteen before any of his brothers for expelling the Xiongnu. Son of the former empress and Emperor Hongzheng.

MU HANZHANG □□□: Married to Jing Shao as Princely Consort Cheng. Courtesy name Junqing □□. Common-born son of Marquis Beiwei. A provincial graduate at seventeen, known as the Erudite Gentleman among many young scholars in the capital.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

LI YANQING □□□: A business associate of Jing Shao's, involved in trafficking of salt permits.

EMPEROR HONGZHENG □□□: Emperor of the Chen Empire; a common-born son of a concubine.

EMPRESS CONSORT / LADY WU □□: Elevated to empress consort after the late empress's death. Sister to Earl Yongchang.

JING CHEN □□: The second prince, Jing Shao's same-blood brother.

JING RONG □□: First Prince, common-born son of Emperor Hongzheng and a palace maid.

JING YU □□: Fourth Prince, legitimate son of the empress consort and Emperor Hongzheng.

DUOFU □□: A eunuch. Chief steward to Jing Shao's estate.

ZHIXI □□: Senior handmaiden of Jing Shao.

MENGXI □□: One of Jing Shao's handmaidens.

MIAOXI □□: One of Jing Shao's handmaidens.

LANXUAN □□: Mu Hanzhang's less articulate handmaiden.

LANTING □□: Mu Hanzhang's quick-witted handmaiden.

CHUNXI □□: A young eunuch in the palace.

SONG LINGXIN □□□ / MADAM SONG □□: Jing Shao's secondary wife, daughter of Song An.

LIU YANJI □□□ / LADY LIU □□: Jing Shao's princely concubine, a gift from the first prince, Jing Rong.

LADY LI □□: Jing Shao's serving concubine, arranged for him by the imperial family when he was still a child. Used to be a palace maid.

SONG AN □□: Vice minister of war, Song Lingxin's father.

MASTER YUN □□□: Steward to the Outer Court of the Prince Cheng Estate.

YUN SONG □□: Jing Shao's pageboy.

YUN ZHU □□: Mu Hanzhang's pageboy.

MARQUIS BEIWEI □□□ / MU JIN □□: Mu Hanzhang's father.

CONCUBINE QIU □□□: Mu Hanzhang's mother.

MU LINGBAO □□□: Heir to the Marquis Beiwei peerage, legitimate-born.

MU YANGWEN □□□: A cousin to Mu Hanzhang.

MU HUAFENG □□□: Another cousin to Mu Hanzhang.

DUKE MAO □□□: Jing Yu's future father-in-law.

DUCHESS MAO □□□□□: Jing Yu's future mother-in-law.

EARL YONGCHANG □□□: The empress consort's brother.

MARQUIS DINGNAN □□□: Jing Chen's father-in-law.

XIAO YUAN □□: Vice minister of revenue. Courtesy name Heng Zhi □□. Distantly related to the House of Dingnan.

ZHOU JIN □□: Xiao Yuan's wife, proprietor of The Flavor of Nostalgia.

MINISTER SUN □□□: Minister of war.

NINE-BLADE GHOST □□□: A martial artist that works for Jing Shao, specializing in concealed weapons.

GE RUOYI □□□: A young woman from Dongnan seeking revenge against King Dongnan for her brother's death.

DU YINGHAO □□□: Wife of the third son of Duke Mao, nephew of Marquise Beiwei, Mu Hanzhang's former schoolmate.

MU SUZHI □□□: Legitimate daughter of Marquis Beiwei.

ANXIAN □□: A eunuch. Emperor Hongzheng's chief steward.

FAN JIE □□: A censor. Sent to Xinan as an imperial envoy.

YANHONG □□: Handmaiden to Marquise Beiwei.

YANCUI □□: Handmaiden to Concubine Qiu.

MASTER CHEN □□□: A resident scholar living in the second prince's estate.

SIR LIN □□□: The wife of Marquis Dingnan's second son.

MISS MEI □□□: The betrothed of a soldier that used to serve in Jing Shao's troops.

XIAO QIAN □□: Captain of the Palace Guard.

DUOLU □□: The empress consort's chief steward, a eunuch.

JING YI □□: Seventh Prince, still a child.

NAMES, HONORIFICS AND TITLES

Courtesy Names and Given Names

Usually made up of two characters, a courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent

for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in historically inspired media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

Terms of Endearment

-ER: A suffix that literally means "son," but in practical usage, it is similar to the English suffix "-ie," much like turning "fish" into "fishie."

GEGE: A word that means "elder brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer.

JIEJIE: A word that means "elder sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

MEIMEI: A word that means "little sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names from *The Wife Comes First.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin—and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

MÙ HÁNZHĀNG

"Mù" sounds like moo, with the fourth sharp tone."Hán" sounds exactly the way it looks, while rising a little in tone, like a question."Zhāng" sounds like Jang, with a flat "ah" in the middle.

JǏNG SHÁO

“Jǐng” sounds like Jing, and rhymes with sing, with a slight fall-and-rise third tone that makes it a little like a question. “Sháo” sounds like Shao, and rhymes with cow.

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Most consonants in pinyin sound just as they do in English. The following are ones that don’t.

J: **jee** as in **jee**p, short

Q: **chee** as in **che**ese, with a slight underbite

X: **sh** as in **sh**e, with a curled tongue under the soft palate

ZH: **j** as in **j**udge, with the tongue curled back

CH: **ch** as in **ch**op, with the tongue curled back

SH: **sh** as in **sh**oe, with the tongue curled back

GENERAL VOWELS

A: **ah** as in f**a**ther

O: **aw** as in **aw**e

E: **er** as in h**er**

I: **ee** as in s**ee**

U: **oo** as in f**oo**d

IU: as in ewe

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

Measurements and Time

All measurements have been converted to standard imperial measurements, with the exception of the “tael,” which is only used for precious metals, and at sixteen gram per tael, it weighs a little more than half of an ounce. A lot of these are approximations; for example, the Ming dynasty’s □□ (one dou) is about 10L, or 2.64 gallons, and depending on the size and quality of the pearls, that can weigh up to 40lbs. Considering that these are high quality pearls, Jing Shao received forty pounds of pearls from the emperor.

The traditional Chinese day was divided into twelve dual-hours, with each hour named after the twelve Earthly Branches. During the Han Dynasty, more meaningful names were given to each dual-hour. There is some overlap with the late evening hours and night watches. When a time of day that denotes a specific dual-hour is given, proper case is used. When a dual-hour passes, the text is localized as two hours.

□□ **FIRST WATCH:** 19:00 – 21:00
□□ **SECOND WATCH:** 21:00 – 23:00
□□ **THIRD WATCH:** 23:00 – 01:00
□□ **FOURTH WATCH:** 01:00 – 03:00
□□ **FIFTH WATCH:** 03:00 – 05:00
□□ **MIDNIGHT:** 23:00 – 01:00
□□ **COCKCROW:** 01:00 – 03:00
□□ **DAYBREAK:** 05:00 – 05:00
□□ **SUNRISE:** 05:00 – 07:00
□□ **BREAKFAST:** 07:00 – 09:00
□□ **MIDMORNING:** 09:00 – 11:00
□□ **HIGH NOON:** 11:00 – 13:00
□□ **AFTERNOON:** 13:00 – 15:00
□□ **WANING SUN:** 15:00 – 17:00
□□ **DUSK:** 17:00 – 19:00
□□ **NIGHTFALL:** 19:00 – 21:00
□□ **DEAD OF NIGHT:** 21:00 – 23:00

GLOSSARY

BOW, CURTSY, KOWTOW: A bow is at the waist, and how deeply the bow goes denotes the level of respect. Curtsies are done by women only, and a Chinese curtsy is done by forming both hands into orchids (thumb touching middle finger), placing both hands by the left hip, bending both knees slightly, and tipping the head. A kowtow is prostration, and involves kneeling, palms facing downward with fingers pointed at opposing hands in front of knees, then bending down until forehead touches the back of fingers. A half kowtow simply means the person bends down only halfway to the hands.

FOUR BOOKS AND FIVE CLASSICS:

Four Books: *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*

Five Classics: *Classic of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *I Ching*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

These books form the core of Confucianism and are what students used to be tested on in the Imperial Examination system.

IMPERIAL EXAMS: Placements within the civil service are gained through participation in the exams system. Graduates at and above the provincial level are often given a modest stipend, a kind of fixed income, so that they can continue studying and perhaps participate in higher level exams, even if they don't hold an official position; Provincial Graduates can participate in the Metropolitan Exams, and Metropolitan Graduates can participate in the Palace Exams. Palace Graduates are announced on a "Golden List." The top three graduates of the Palace Exams are translated here as: Primus Scholar, Secundus Eye, and Tertius Flower.

INNER FORCE: An internal force that circulates through the meridians of the body, which is controlled by martial artists to achieve near supernatural physical feats.

LIGHTNESS ARTS: A kind of martial arts that allows one to practically fly.

MEMORIAL TO THE THRONE: A memorial is an official letter written to the emperor in essay format, and anyone has the right to submit one. In reality, memorials written by someone other than court officials and nobles were often rejected by the secretariat for improper formatting.

MIASMA: Miasma is a noxious vapor that rises from the ground and causes disease. Since the people of the Central Plains had never encountered tropical diseases before, when they came down with malaria, dysentery, and hemorrhagic fevers, they attributed it to these miasmic vapors that rose from the ground. In *The History of Eastern Han*, General Ma Yuan's encounter with the south's miasma is described thus: "Stagnant water below, fog above; poisonous vapor rises."

PRINCES, RANKS, AND TITLES: Princes are usually made commandery prince when they come of age (twenty), but only made imperial prince with a bestowed title after they accomplish enough to be granted one, and the title itself is related to this accomplishment. Prince Cheng, for example, means "imperial prince of success," for expelling the Xiongnu in battle. Even before being granted a title, however, they are considered of superlative rank and above the bureaucracy's official ranks that go from one to nine, each divided into Proper and Lesser. Dukes, marquises, and other nobles that were granted hereditary titles by the emperor are also of superlative rank. Imperial Prince is a title just below the heir to the throne and the emperor.

SPRING RECKONING: In counting age by spring reckoning, a person is one the moment they're born, and the age number goes up by one every first day of the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year).

THREE OBEDIENCES AND FOUR VIRTUES: This is the social code for women who lived under Confucianism. A woman must obey first her father, then her husband, and then if she is widowed, she must obey her sons. The four virtues are: feminine conduct, feminine speech, feminine comportment, and feminine works. One can sum these up to being "ladylike."

About the Author

Lv Ye Qian He is a signed writer with Jinjiang Literature City, a member of the China Writers Association, a council member of the Internet Writers Association of Henan, and vice-chair of the Internet Writers Association of Zhengzhou. She's been writing online fiction for fifteen years, specializing in cute and feel-good stories. Her notable works include *The Wife Comes First* and *Mr. Dior*. Her works are popular both in China and abroad, and many have already been adapted into TV dramas, animated series, comics, and radio dramas.

Footnotes

Chapter 1: Despair and Rebirth

[1] A primary wife of a household is the principal mother to all its children, including the children of the concubines.

Chapter 4: A Visit to the Palace

[2] The luan, also known as luanniao, is a mythological bird, deified in ancient China, and considered an omen of peace.

[3] A suffix that literally means son, used to make a name sound cuter, somewhat like turning “fish” into “fishie.”

Chapter 7: Homecoming

[4] Literally means older brother, often used affectionately by people who are not related. Jiejie would mean older sister.

Chapter 8: The Marquis Beiwei Estate

[5] The weapon’s transliterated names read Lingbao, Hanzhang, and Suzhi, respectively.

[6] Taken from the Biography of Guan Ning, who was said to possess the nine virtues in their purest form. Here, these virtues are represented as sacred artifacts.

Chapter 14: Green Plums

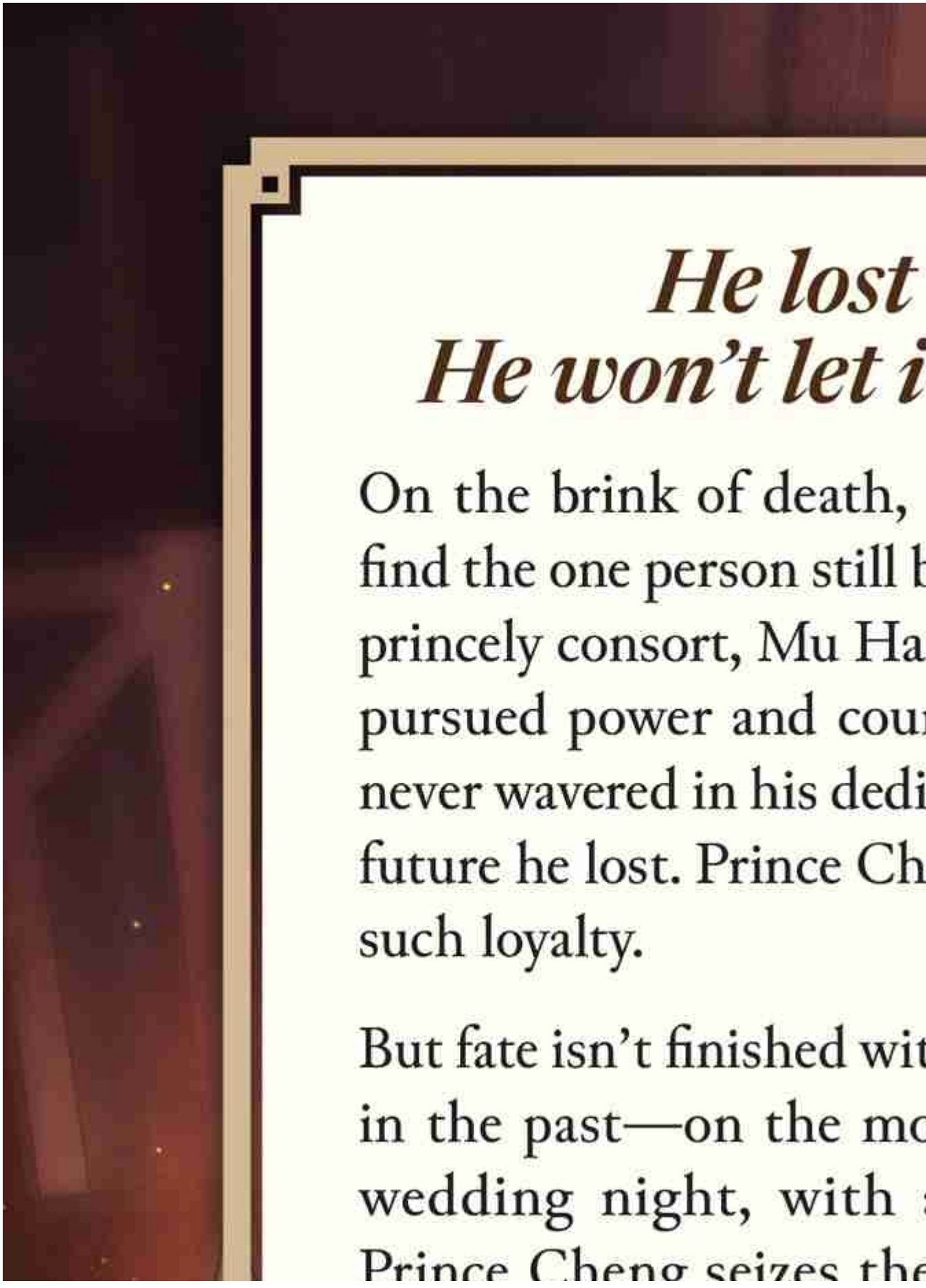
[7] From a poem by Bai Juyi. “Green plums and bamboo horse” is an idiom that describes a couple that knew each other from childhood.

Chapter 36: The Abolishment of the Feudatories

[8] An idiom alluding to the fact that once war is over, the power given to supporting civil and military officials should be revoked, diminished, or otherwise dealt with.

妻为上
社稷次
君为轻

The wife comes f
and the husband


He lost
He won't let i
On the brink of death,
find the one person still
princely consort, Mu Ha
pursued power and cou
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future he lost. Prince Ch
such loyalty.
But fate isn't finished wi
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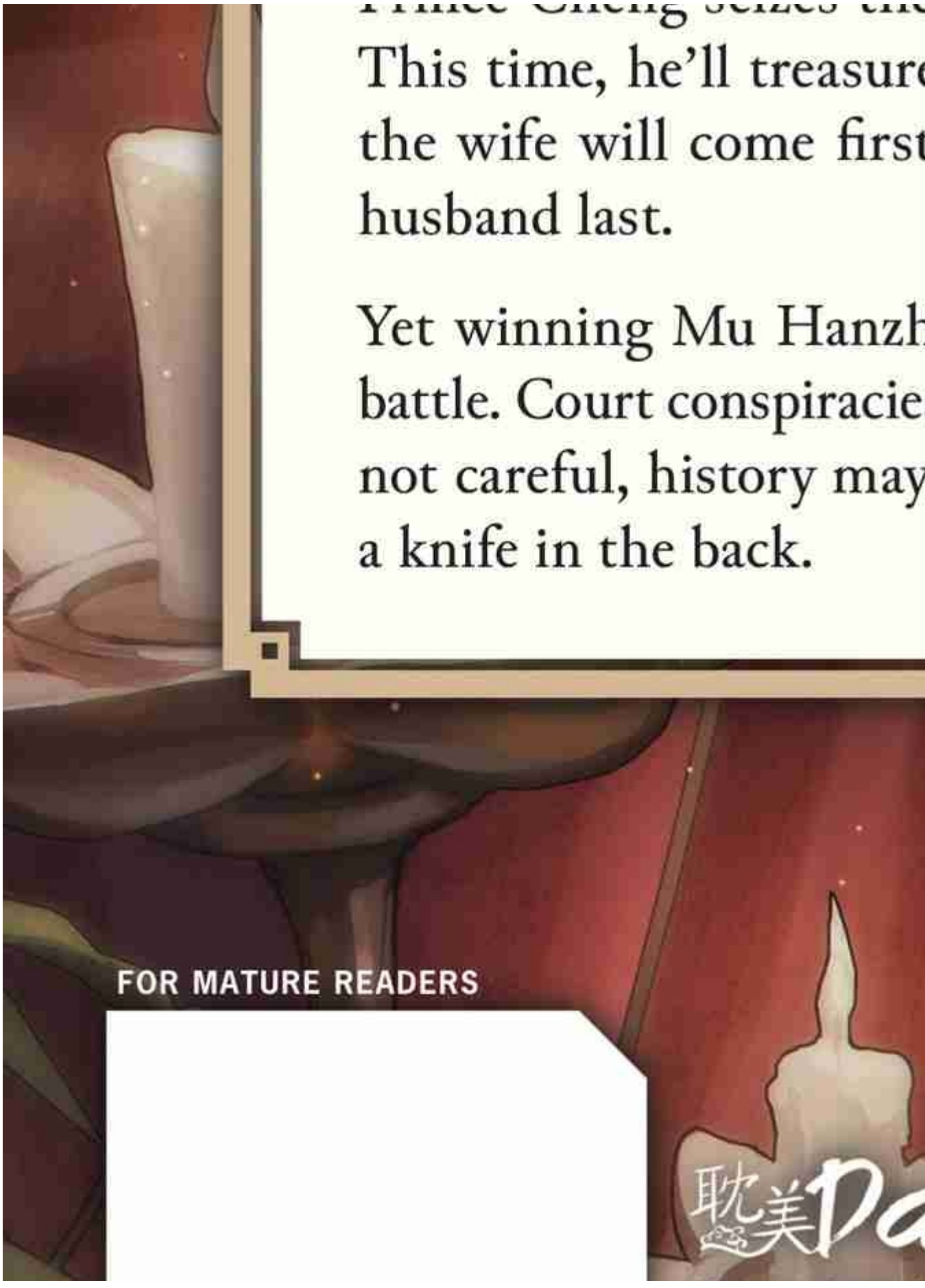
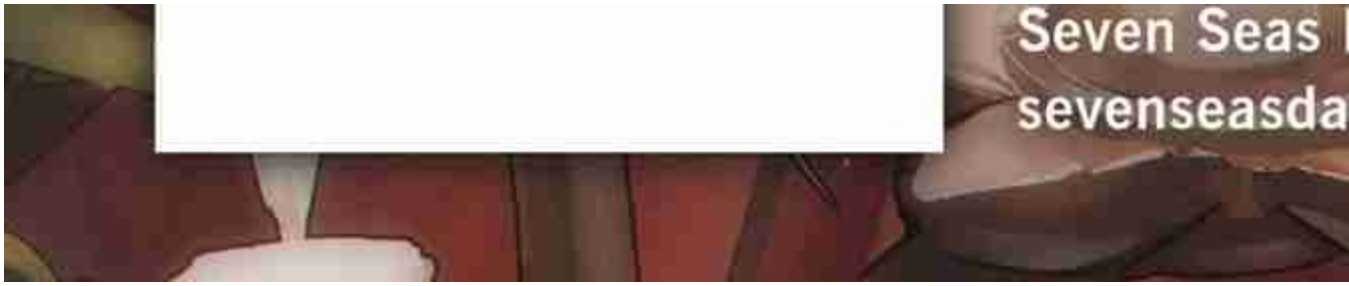
Prince Cheng seizes the


This time, he'll treasur
the wife will come first
husband last.
Yet winning Mu Hanzh
battle. Court conspiracie
not careful, history may
a knife in the back.
FOR MATURE READERS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